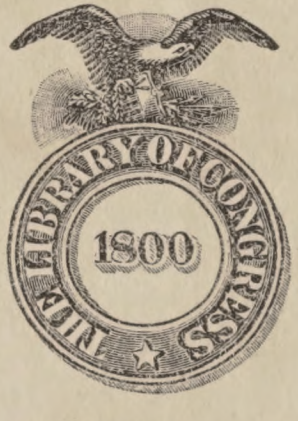
JOAN AT HALFWAY

GRACE McLEOD ROGERS



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BY

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NEW YORK

GEORGE H. DORAN COMPANY

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TO MY AUNT JOSEPHINE

CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
I	To Fetch a Pail of Water	11
II	My Lady Goes A-Driving	20
III	Proving the Wisdom Blood	26
IV	The Freedom of the Office	33
V	Roadside Dreams	43
VI	Captain Nat Holds His Own	52
VII	Life's Stores of Experience	62
VIII	The Meadow Island	75
IX	Skipper Jane's Daughter	90
X	And Who Is Lisbeth?	102
XI	The Road to Meadow Island	112
XII	It Must Be Philip's Grandchild	126
XIII	A Long Lost Letter	141
XIV	The End of a Lovely Day	149
XV	A Gipsy's Encampment	156
XVI	Sweet Fields Beyond	170
XVII	The Gay Car of Pleasure	183
XVIII	Storm Clouds Blow Over	197
XIX	Rough Sailing	214
XX	Aunt Hetty Visits Town	224
XXI	Nothing Haps to Fearless Feet	234
XXII	"Do What You Set Out to Do"	241
XXIII	The Mystery of the Mill	248
XXIV	Aunt Hetty's Home-Coming	259

CHAPTER		PAGE
XXV	In the Joy Her Spirit Fled	270
XXVI	A Land with Radiant Glory Fraught	279
XXVII	Youth's Vision Splendid	291
XXVIII	Joan Is Mistress at Halfway	305
XXIX	Stories of the Loom Room	322
XXX	An Island Lacking Water	336
XXXI	The Unfinished Web of Cloth	353
XXXII	Dispossessed of His Heritage	363
XXXIII	Wooden Water-Piper	377
XXXIV	The Water Flows Back to the Island	392
XXXV	A Gay and Singing Heart	405

JOAN AT HALFWAY

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CHAPTER I

TO FETCH A PAIL OF WATER

"JO-ANN—Jo-ann!"

Uncle Garret's voice was querulous and thin. Its volume had fled with his youth and strength; moreover it ended in a snarly twitch, as if a sudden twinge of pain had shorn it of its full intent.

Uncle Garret was sitting on the side verandah. The splint-bottomed chair, which usually supported his rheumatic leg, was untenanted; both the strong limb and the ailing one resting upon the floor. Uncle Garret could not lift the lame leg himself, and that was one of the reasons why he had been willing to have Joan come to Halfway, but it was not the main reason. That main purpose he kept to himself, only making answer to those who questioned, that he had got her for help and company. Uncle Garret was Stipendary Magistrate, and disabled as he had been of late by rheumatism, surely needed help, young eyes and willing feet and deft hands.

And she ought to be around in sight when he wanted her, especially when Aunt Hetty was not at home; where could she be loitering! He called again, three times, in his thin, sharp voice.

"Jo-ann, Jo-ann, Jo-an-n!" The last call was piercing, and full of twitches and twinges. Joan on her way to the spring for water, heard it, and recognising the pain in it, came

hurriedly back across the garden. Dropping her empty pail upon the steps, she stooped to lift the lame limb to its usual easy posture.

"Leave my leg where it now is," commanded Uncle Garret, "I've got enough of the spirit of a man left in me to want to manage my own legs, when I'm able, and when I'm not able I'll let you know. I want this leg left in a recumbent position. Do you understand?"

Joan understood, and she sat down herself in the comfortable old splint chair which seemed to hold out its arms to her like a real friend here in this strange and lonely place. "What did you want, then, Uncle?" she asked timidly.

"I want you around," said the old man, "in sight and sound. Why didn't you call back when first you heard me? You're the stillest girl I ever knew. Your Aunt Rebecca could have told me all she had done the whole day and intended to do on the next, while *she* came across the garden. You *look* as if you could talk. We're not a mum race; are you sulking? Why did you bring back an empty pail?" he added suddenly, as his gaze fell upon the bucket at his feet.

"I hadn't got to the spring when you called, and I came back."

"Then go now again and fill it," aaid he. "Always do the thing you set out to do. Never let yourself be turned aside from your purpose. We Wisdoms stick to our own plans and carry them out, too, no matter who interferes nor whom we knock down on the road. And do make a noise, hit the pail against the fence, or shout, or do something to get your tongue loose, and to make a sound around here. I've been alone an hour or more, and I want you to talk to me when you come back. I got you for company, do you understand?"

Joan was not sure if she did, but she liked the sudden cessation of hostilities indicated by his odd demand; and half in dread and half in defiance she turned and looked steadily into the stern old face of her inquisitor, from out which his blue eyes shone clear as a bit of Heaven's own

sky—tender, kindly, friendly eyes, mayhap, if you ever dared meet them in like guise; stern and mocking and pitiless, if you feared them—they, and the broad high brow above them like a temple's dome, the sole features left unmarred in the pain lined visage. Her own had always fallen before their glance, but this time they held and challenged; the orphan friendless girl claiming not by appeal but by inherent right of race, his interest and his love.

They each found a friend in the survey, though neither of them knew it outright, but the fear and the awe of him for the moment seemed to slip away from Joan, and a smile hovered about the corners of her firm set lips at the queer request—the little crooked Wisdom smile, that might turn into a laugh and might not; you were never just sure. And as she passed down the side path of the garden she bumped the bucket regularly against the picket fence. But when she reached the spring she threw the pail to the ground and burst into a passion of crying; so near are our smiles, sometimes, to our tears. And the little crooked Wisdom smile is often just a mere bravado.

Uncle Garret heard the thumps upon the pickets. He could not hear the later sobbing, and he muttered to himself as he rolled the tobacco for his pipe, "She's Jo-ann over again, and my mother too. She'll be sociable enough, if she's like them, sociable enough once she lets her real self out. She's holding back, now, stubborn, proud—a bird of the feather all right; looks, and speech and high step"—and Uncle Garret in the stupor of his pipe fell to memories of the past, and forgot the passage of time.

Down at the spring Joan was still sobbing. The little hollow was not a restful place of beauty; it was barren and solitary, but was the one spot of refuge from the big, high, bleak old house, where no querulous call could reach her, nor eye obtrude. A little clump of forlorn larches stretched their gaunt arms seaward, though the engirdling hills that cupped the spring had long æons since shut the sea from

sight; a tongue of grey primordial sand that lapped the verdured slope of the lowest hill and bordered the outlet ravine, all that betokened its one time nearness. But though the sea was twelve good miles away, beyond the hilltop rims, Joan thought she could sometimes smell it here when the wind blew strong from thence, and the salt sniff was like a breath of delight to her desire, for never before had she lived out of its scent nor the sound of its swish, and the landlocked little village seemed a prison.

To be truthful she had seen the village but once, as yet, and that as she passed through it on the mailcoach on the early morning of her arrival. Uncle Garret's great old grey house was four miles from the Settlement, and up from the road at that, a hundred yards and more, at the end of a broad lane bordered with yellow pine.

There had been no one down at the high stone-hung gates to greet her. "I'd walk up to Halfway with you," the mailman had said, in friendly proffer of civilities, as he set her small box by the roadside, "but His Majesty's mail, it's supposed to keep a moving on always. The Squire he'll be up at the house all right, for he's hitched close at home with rheumatiz these days, has it pretty bad, off and on—more on than off I guess. You'll find your way up all right." And clambering to his high-backed box seat, with a crack of his whip to his sorrel pair, he and the mailcoach were out of sight along the old post-road that rolled away to places far beyond.

But the other passenger had said something to the mailman, and Joan had heard it, quick though they were in departure. He had been in survey of her, as she stood by the high gates in the chill morning mist; her small, dark oval face, the deep pure blue of her sapphire eyes shining from out it, and the darker setting of her black lustrous hair.

"She'd never be lost long around these parts," said he. "A Wisdom through and through! And the thirst too, I'll be bound!"

"Sons' sons and daughters' sons"—replied the mailman. And the rest was lost in whirr of wheel and dash of hoof.

"Sons' sons and daughters' sons,"—and "the thirst"—What did it mean, Joan wondered, as she walked up the long lane alone, the wet grass of the footpath soaking her shoes and stockings through, the wind moaning in the pine tops, the heavy morning mist from the meadows flooding the lowlands like a silent silver stream.

And what was it that had made her feel *as if she had been there before,* on that road through the village! The coach had met the train at midnight, and all the long ride across country had been in darkness, only the lantern gleam at whiffletree front to track the gloom of the deep woods. But when they reached the village it was early dawn, and through the thick mist as they drove along, suddenly an oak clump, in cluster of three, great spreading trees, stood out plain, and strangely familiar, as if she had sometime played under their leafy roof and searched out their brown cup treasures.

On, and a bend in the road showed a river, winding, and clear over a gravelly bed, with a ripple sweet as music, and as they rumbled across its spanning bridge she felt as if her own feet had once been upon it. But the mist swallowed it from sight behind her, and the horses sped along.

And there was a brown, weather-beaten old chapel, with a towered belfrey—and farther on a big square one with double tier of windows, and tapering spire, and she seemed to be *expecting to see them.* As they slipped from her view they were like a bit of a dream, those familiar recurrent ones, that persist, in our brains, over and over, making us conscious only when waking from out them that we *have been to that place again*—just the brief fleeting tantalising familiar impression, and it is gone—perhaps not to come again for months, sometimes years.

Then Joan had found herself watching and waiting for

another sight, peering out on either side, not visualising, but looking for something, and suddenly it met her gaze, a narrow road at her right, trailing down through the thick woods, a grass grown road, not a single waggon track to scar its narrow way, and a great steep hill clothed in pines, at one side. A turn hid it from further view, and from there on all the way was new, and the strange dream sensation of sights was gone. And the heavy mist had turned to rain, coming down in a torrent shower upon the cover above her head, and splashing in at the unprotected sides, Joan at the driver's behest sitting in the middle of the seat, forgetting all else but to keep dry, till they were at Halfway, her journey's end.

Now she had been here a week and a day, and though she had food and shelter, she did not yet feel welcome, for Aunt Hetty had a still tongue in her head, and Uncle Garret a sharp one in his, and they were all three on edge, feathers bristled, senses alert, getting adjusted, finding a common centre—and the process was not pleasant, at least not to Joan, though she had not given way to tears until now.

When she finally ceased her sobbing, and in the o'er brimming rivulets from the cool spring had washed the traces from her face and eyes, she turned back her steps to the house, evidently making up her mind to obey orders and be "company," for when she had set the pail of water down she opened up a conversation.

"Who is the one you called Aunt Rebecca?" she asked. "Does she live near here and is she my Aunt?"

"Your Aunt Rebecca was my first consort," replied Uncle Garret with dignity. "She lives not at all, now. She is my deceased wife, and your Aunt Hetty, who was her sister, has taken her place and is my second one. She is a good housewife and manages Halfway well, but she is not content to stay at home. She likes to be up and away too often. So I got you for company, do you understand? But you are not doing much at it yet."

Joan was beginning to be afraid again, he looked so harsh and forbidding as he spoke. But she would never dare make conversation with him of her own accord, and she wanted to find out some more things while yet he held out the golden sceptre, so taking no notice of the thrust as to her social delinquencies, and stifling her fears, she continued her questioning.

"Is Aunt Hetty a real Aunt to me?" she asked.

"An aunt-in-law, only."

"Haven't I any real ones? The mailman who drove me here said I had a lot of relatives, 'more than some people have hay,' he said. I mean the real aunts,—like—you are my—uncle," she added hesitatingly. "Are there any others?"

"None to speak of," replied the old man curtly.

"Why, Aunt Hetty told me——"

"Oh, so she talks to you, evidently!"

"She only tells me things when I ask her about them. And I don't think she wants me here very much. I've never been wanted, anywhere, for I've never had a truly home. I'm always just sent to some place and when I'm beginning to get used to the people why then I have to go somewhere else."

"From pillar to post, eh!" said Uncle Garret, not unkindly, if you could separate the words and their evident intent from the gruff, sharp tone. "Well, you're here to stay, so your trotting days are over now. They were not 'the real kind' as you term it, where you stayed before you were put at the School, I'll tell you that. They were only connections, on your father's side, and a poor lot they were; lost you what little property you had and were glad to wash their hands of you and send you on to me when I made enquiries about you."

Joan winced at the thrust, and turned her small dark face to his, with a proud, yet wistful gesture that stirred old memories in the great uncle's heart.

"I thought you asked me!" she said, "and I never knew I had what you call property. Nobody ever told me that before. I thought people just kept me because I helped them. And I had to work hard, at the School, to pay for it. We stayed and worked summers on the farm. It was that kind of a school, for girls who didn't have any home, or any money."

"Well, you hadn't much. When your parents lost their lives at sea, you and the few hundreds they left you were placed with some of your father's tribe. Properly looked after it might have been enough for bread and meat, and school, till you could earn for yourself. But near as I can find out they kept the money for themselves, and passed you around from one to another, fetching and carrying for them; and it's my opinion that the only reason they sent you to school was because they recollected about me, and thought I was getting old, and if you were a promising girl, and had some education, that I might leave my property to you, for them to get hold of. But I'm not going to do it, and you may as well know it first as last. I'll give you a good living, but all I have, goes when I am done with it, to found an old man's Home. Do you understand?"

If Joan did, or did not, she made no answer, and the old Uncle talked on.

"They never were any good, your father's folks—Wisdoms in name but only 'half's,' and your mother shouldn't have married into them again, as her own mother did before her. Too much of one strain does not make for strength, though you're no fool, as anybody with half an eye could see. They were an easy-going lot, that branch of us, most of them, with no proper standard as to what befit the name; handsome and good company, but no fight in them, had no backbone, nothing but a string for one—wouldn't stand up for their own rights."

It stung the girl, young as she was, the scorn in his voice, and she turned quickly to him and met the hard old gaze

again. "Why is it good to have so much fight in you?" she asked; "you don't *have* to fight everybody and everything do you?"

"To get on in the world, you do, or you're left behind in the race, and trodden upon. You have it within you, yourself, I see, or you wouldn't have spoken up as you did, and shown your spirit. We'll maybe get on quite well, if you'll wake up. Now fill my pitcher," said he abruptly, "and take the pail on into the entry, or it will not be fit to use to-night. No, wait a bit, give me a drink first." And the old man reached out an eager hand for the cocoanut dipper that lay on the table beside his pitcher, and plunging it deep into the brimming pail, he drained off its contents at a single quaff, once, and again, and yet again.

Joan watched him, strangely fascinated, and with a clutching thirst in her own throat at the sight. She would like to drink that way herself, for it had seemed to her ever since she had come to Halfway and seen the great quantities of water that Uncle Garret drank, that she could never get enough to quench her own thirst. Perhaps, if she should drink a great deal at one time, as he did, her craving would get its fill.

So, when she had presently lifted the pail to the corner shelf in the cool dark entry, she took from the nail above it the big brown mug that always hung there, and drank it full, three times, just as Uncle Garret had, at a swallow each.

CHAPTER II

MY LADY GOES A-DRIVING

WHEN Joan awoke next morning, Aunt Hetty was standing in the bedroom doorway. "You'd best get up, now," said she; "your Uncle does not like lay-abeds."

Joan sprang shamefacedly from the big fourposter and began at her shoes and stockings.

Aunt Hetty came over and stood by the little swivel mirror that set atop the high chest of drawers, so high that Joan could not see herself at all in its oval face, and even Aunt Hetty had to stand on tiptoes to it. Joan noted that she had on her bonnet and veil, and was tying the strings in a snug bow beneath her chin. "Is it very late?" she asked, anxiously, fearful that she had perhaps slept through the forenoon, if Aunt Hetty was ready for away.

"It's early enough," replied Aunt Hetty in her placid absent sort of voice, that trailed off into space often before she got out her last words. "I'm getting a good start. Your Uncle had his sciatica bad last night, never slept a wink, groaning and tossing. He'll be dozy and not get up till near noon. It is Phoebe's two days a week here, and she wants nobody else around when she's working, so I am getting off on my visit downriver, for I'm not needed so much for company now that you're here."

Alone all day with Uncle Garret! Why need she go visiting so often, leaving him to other people! Joan looked her dismay.

Aunt Hetty while talking had been turning over in her mind just how freely she should speak. The family skele-

ton did not stay in its closet, at Halfway, but stalked about in plain sight of everybody, so why try to evade its actuality with this new member of the household, thought she. And so as if Joan's wondering dismay had been expressed speech, Aunt Hetty made answer.

"The only way I can get off is to go, and let him make the best of it when he finds it out. I'd never get my foot outside Halfway if I waited for consent or proposal. I'm getting on in years, and my time is too short to put off any longer doing the things I want to do. Living as I did for so long away from these parts I lost track of many of my old friends, and it takes quite a spell to hunt them up. That was why I was willing to let you come, to be some help to your Uncle while I'm off."

Joan shrank at the plain speech; and the dear dream of being invited for love alone by these new-found relatives, was forever shattered. It was going to be just as it always had been before, for service only!

Aunt Hetty finally adjusted her bonnet strings to her taste, pulled over her face the long embroidered veil, and drawing her gloves from her pocket sat down in the chintz barrel-chair to rub them on. Evidently she was not in immediate haste, and someway, quiet and distant though she had been all the week, she looked rather friendly this morning to the lonely young girl who was hurrying with feverish haste lest she should not be ready and dressed to answer that shrill call that might suddenly sound from below. Was Aunt Hetty afraid of him as she was, Joan wondered. Presumably not, or she would not dare his displeasure by going away so much.

"Will Phoebe know me?" she queried, as she braided her long black hair.

"What Phoebe doesn't know at the start she'll soon find out," answered Aunt Hetty. "She'll tell you about everything and everybody, if she wants to, and if she does not want to she'll let you alone. You can never count on Phoebe,

she has her own ways—but we humour her, and she takes full charge while I'm gone. It's always easier to get on with your Uncle after she's been here, for they fight all the time, and some of it gets out of his system that way. She enjoys rowing with him, but I wouldn't wonder if she does it too to ease us up. Phoebe has eyes in the back of her head all right"—and Aunt Hetty's voice trailed off again from the effort of her long speech, and she turned as if listening for some signal from below. None forthcoming, she talked on.

"Phoebe'll clear out his rooms, and pull him out on the veranda, if he's able, that is her weekly stint—and the meals, and baking ahead, and sweeping the house. She used to live here herself when she was a girl, half help, half folks she is, and knows every nook of it."

"I'd love to see it all through," said Joan.

"It's a big fine old place," said Aunt Hetty, "rooms up this flight that are never opened and the third story not used at all, and an attic above that. I like a big house better than a little one, but it's clear pride to build one the size of this. They were always proud and masterful, the Wisdoms, and all around the country here they had their homes—one house was high and slabsided, one long and low, another spread out, but all of them boastful and full of rooms. And those that built them are dead and gone, and the family is nearly run out, as far as name and blood and house going together. This chamber was your grandmother's—and the loom-room opens off it—she was a great hand at weaving. You're like her in looks."

Here Aunt Hetty abruptly ceased her talking. Joan had lost many of the words as they strained off in that absent dreamy voice, yet as she listened, suddenly the fleeting, dreamlike fancy had come again, and she thought she could see inside some of those Wisdom houses, into one of them plainest, with a wonderful upstairs parlour that had no corners, a round room—and then it was gone again as

quickly. But the bewilderment of it was still in her face as Aunt Hetty rose to go.

"There is my call," said she. "Pelig has been getting out the new top-buggy for me. It's never been used since your Uncle got it, simply because he can't go in it himself. The old chaise is broken and my own mare lame so there was nothing else to be done. There'll likely be a fuss when he finds out, for if Phoebe has eyes in the back of her head your Uncle has ears all down his neck and he always knows everything that goes on. But it will be well blown over by the time I get back, and a stew is never as hot warmed over."

The girl looked in amazement at the mild-voiced little Aunt who dared such bold deeds and braved such a storm of temper as would undoubtedly descend upon her later on.

"I'll be away until to-morrow," said Aunt Hetty as she turned from the bedroom. "If Pelig is not around, you'll maybe have to go down to the post-office to get the mail. It's 'Free Press' day, and your Uncle would sooner miss his supper than the 'Free Press.' He, and Johnson who runs it haven't spoken to each other since last election, but he reads every word, even though he's against it all. We get our mail at the Corner, not at the River. They'll tell you the way. Your Uncle's cousin Alexander keeps the office. He'll do some quizzing when he get his eyes on you."

Joan presently heard the rumble of outgoing wheels, and she had just completed her dressing when the shrill call came sounding up the winding stairs, and out through the hall to the chamber that had been her grandmother's. She hastened down, but had not reached the wing-rooms where was Uncle Garret's bedroom and office, when she was barred the passage by Phoebe.

"You get your breakfast first," commanded the woman, "and I'll tend to him for a while. He's that mad he'd bite nails this morning, and you'll need something in your stomach to stay you—your meal is laid out."

Phoebe! thought Joan, though she did not like to look

straight at the stranger, and it was dark in the entry-way. It must be Phoebe, and oh, what a good Phoebe! Never in her life before had such a bountiful breakfast been spread her. Her eager hungry lonely eyes took it all in at a glance —porridge and yellow cream, baked apples, and curds, and patty-pancakes, warm and crispy at the edges! Phoebe must have been here hours, to do these things. And other delicious whiffs crept in from the kitchen.

Youth is ever joyous at heart, though sorrow may touch at eye and lip, and in spite of forebodings and loneliness it was just a hungry happy sixteen year old girl who ate that breakfast. She was nearly through when the woman came in and placed a plate of biscuits upon the table—not round ones, but oblongs and diamonds and nubbins of no shape at all, each of them brown and flaky. Joan had been used to round biscuits, cutter limit pattern, with no possible variance, like the ugly school hours, and all her plain and dreary life behind—but these jumbly things so delicious in smell and look, where had she eaten them before! somewhere, once, somewhere, a curious tantalising impression; and when she glanced up to meet the gaze of the tall person who stood looking down upon her, the stranger's face was someway an association of the memory.

"I'm Phoebe," said the woman, "and you're called Joan Wisdom, they tell me. By your looks it couldn't well be anything else."

Joan started to rise in greeting, but Phoebe waved her back. "You're the fourth one of them," said she, "and they haven't been an overly happy line, but that's not saying you've got to be like them, though I'd take a better chance on it if your likeness wasn't so strong. They're a terrible family to sort of persist, and you can always pick them out by their black head, or a blue eye, or that wrinkle of yours in the nose, or their hot temper. The real name is scarce now, but still you have to look all round before you say Wisdom, in these parts, for there's a bit of the blood in most

every family, more or less, and the less the better, though I'll admit I've a few drops myself.

"Your Uncle Garret is the most cussed one of the lot. But I'm not afraid of him, even in his worst tantrums.

"After you get up his spring water, you go do your room, and I'll see to him till he's able to be moved out. He'll not brow-beat me!" And Phoebe was gone before the girl could even get in one word of comment or question.

"It's like Uncle Garret does," thought Joan. "They're done talking so sudden, and that's the end of it, and it's a queer way, but I like it, for most people take so long to tell things, and talk on and on." And though she did not know it herself, it was her own way, too, and a Wisdom way.

CHAPTER III

PROVING THE WISDOM BLOOD

THE gods were always kind around where Phoebe was, something beneficent surrounding and emanating from her comfortable capable presence. If the drop of Wisdom blood gave a thorn prick now and then, she always took the sting out later on with some kindly word or deed. Every household where she temporarily tarried would fain have pressed her into continual abiding, but Phoebe was nothing if she was not her own mistress. For days, or weeks, as the will took her, she would stay in some home needing her competent administration, and then she was off to another, or back to her own.

"I get the news that way, and keep acquainted, and no one tires of me, nor I of them," she would say.

To hear her in racy recital of some of their doings, you might think she told all she gathered. Not she. Wild horses couldn't drag out of Phoebe what she judged was best kept to herself.

And the drop of Wisdom blood held her head high. She was no mere hired help, but help spelled in capital letters, clear through—what the threshing machine was to the farmer with waiting grain—the portable mill to the lumberman with logs piled high—the Commission and chairman thereof for some tangled and disputed government problem.

Securely a-seat the mower, she cut always the first swath around her own hay fields. Her well-kept roofs on house and barn were shingled by herself. The same capable hands had woven her blankets and carpets and linen; not tied alone

to such homely tasks, they knitted fine lace and spreading quilts, and embroidered in gay worsteds the ottomans and lamp mats and cushions adorning the little front room of her one-story house. While she did all these, her shrewd brain turned over the problems of state that reached the quiet hamlet, with her own caustic opinion upon each, for Phoebe had a mind of her own, an independent judgment, and clear eyes, a Radical, mayhap, but from such come our Reforms. She always talked politics with the men of the houses where she tarried, many a pungent digest passed off later as their own, emanating from herself. And though she may have got left out when the good looks were going round, her comeliness was not to be judged by features alone, for a whimsical expression of eye and lip lent lustre to her face, and the ready wit and the vim of her spirit more than atoned for her plain make-up.

Sensing that Uncle Garret's room was a dull and hard abode for a young girl on a summer's day, Phoebe by one device and another—rhubarb to pluck, chickens to feed, raisins to stone, wiled away the forenoon, and Joan had only been in and out for sudden calls, when dinner was over, and it was time to go for the mail.

Uncle Garret was beginning to be drowsy again, but he had been in a high temper all the morning, for his rheumatism was bad; and no man, though he faces a lion or a sudden danger in glorious and splendid courage, can bear with patience bodily pain. Uncle Garret did not even try to bear his, he cast it off with unstinted measure upon everybody in sound or sight. "He'd swear the legs off an iron pot, he's that taken up with his miseries to-day," commented Phoebe as she answered a strident call from the wing-rooms. And Joan could hear him giving her some reiterated command, their shrill altercation, and presently her own name called. But she was not allowed to answer the summons.

"You stay out here," said Phoebe, blocking her entrance, as in the early morning, "and go send Pelig to him."

"Who is Pelig, where is he?" asked Joan, then recalling Aunt Hetty's mention of him getting ready for her the top-buggy.

"He's out in the back region somewhere," said Phoebe, "just got back from the woods. I'll likely find him quicker myself." And soon there came following her back through the rooms a red-headed, slouchy-limbed young fellow, heavy of build and feature. He touched a lock of his ruddy hair in salute as he passed Joan, glancing rather curiously and quite composedly too, at the young stranger who had come to Halfway in his absence.

"This is Pelig," proffered Phoebe in introduction. "He helps Hiram out with the farming this summer. He's been off in the woods sighting timber, but you'll see more of him later along," and marshalled by her leading he and Phoebe went on to Uncle Garret's room. After a short period of stormy words the sound of which reached out even to where Joan sat, the youth returned, but made no pause as he passed her by, and presently Phoebe herself emerged.

"It's about his old chariot," explained she. "You'd think he was keeping it to 'go up' in! He found out she'd taken it, and summoned us all to court, for witnesses, but though I don't know law, I know you shouldn't be allowed to tell tales and testify against your Aunt Hetty. I overheard her talking to you this morning about it, and though I'm no special admirer of hers, she's a harmless sort, with her everlasting patchwork piecing and her visiting bump, and it's not fair for you to give her away, as you would have maybe had to do if that old inquisitor got cross-questioning you. It would set her against you to know you had told tales, and I reckon you'll have a hard enough row to hoe at Halfway without getting a wrong start with the mistress of it. One thing more nor less won't count, far as Pelig and I are concerned for we're used to Garret's ways. He didn't get much information out of Pelig; that boy has got a lot of good sense hid away in his red head."

"Who did you say Pelig is?" asked Joan, a kindly curiosity aroused at mention of her scape-goat.

"He's a farm-hand and yet he's one of the tribe," replied the woman, "and I'll never forget the first day he came. Your Aunt had set his dinner out on the kitchen table, where all the hired men had always eaten. He was washing up when we three came on in here to ours, and your Uncle he hadn't more than got through carving when in comes Pelig, his plate and knife and fork in his hand, and drawing up a chair from the wall he shoved over the side dishes and set himself down at the table.

" 'Go back to your place,' roared the Squire.

" 'This is my place,' said he. 'I'm kin of the family, and you know it, and no matter what I work at or where I be my place is with them if I choose to take it,' and he passed up his plate for meat.

"I was frightened, myself, for once in my life, and your Aunt Hetty was white as the table cloth, for Garret held up the carving knife and fork, and looked clear murder. And then sudden he dropped them and burst out into a big hearty laugh, and he put out his hand to the boy.

" 'You're right,' he said, 'you're right, make yourself at home at Halfway. You proved the blood in you, sure enough, and I admit the kinship. Gad, but I wouldn't own you if you'd stayed in the kitchen.' And he was better natured through that dinner than I've ever seen him before or since."

"Then he is a hired man, just the same, even if he is a relation?" asked Joan.

"He is and he's not," replied Phoebe sententiously. "He stays mostly for meals with the people who run the farm for your Uncle, coming and going here as he pleases. Poor or rich we're none of us such paupers as not to have a mind and will of our own, and though Pelig has had no chance in life, he's a good keen head on him even if 'tis a red one. He'll not bother you with his company unless you want it, but I've told you about him so it will help you to understand

him. You'll maybe need a friend here sometime, and maybe you could help him out, too. He can't be more than a year or so older than you are, though he looks so grown, and he's a great worker. It will soon be mailtime," she added. "You had better go in and sit awhile with your Uncle, and get your orders. I guess he's cooled off a bit now."

But Uncle Garret's fire had been only smouldering. "Much company you are," he flamed out as he sighted Joan. "Phoebe bossing and messing around me all the forenoon, and your Aunt Hetty off on one of her endless visits. She's nothing for sociability when she is about, but a man likes his wife around where she can wait on him, if he clothes and feeds her. Her visiting days are over now, after this high-handed jaunt she's off on! And you've been moping, I suppose, homesick likely," with a sharp glance at Joan to see how she took it. "Go get me some fresh water. I'll not drink this stale stuff Phoebe set out."

"You'll drink the spring dry," commented Phoebe who had entered for something and heard his command. "When I do we'll tap another," replied he——. "This one has been bubbling for five generations of us."

"Then it wasn't from fear of it running dry that made you cut off the Island supply," said she.

If this was meant for a special sword-thrust, Uncle Garret had evidently parried the blow, for his masklike face gave no show of disturbance within. And Joan was soon off to the spring, and back again with a brimming pail, no loitering this time, for the prospect of a walk to get the mail was enticing. She had not been outside Halfway grounds since her arrival.

"Fill up my jug before you leave," said the great-uncle; and then snatching from her small hands the cocoanut dipper with which she was making a sorry attempt at the task, he lifted it aloft, full to the brim, and poured with direct and steady flow into the small mouth of the jug, not a drop oversplashing.

"Pour high, girl, pour high," said he, "and there'll be no dribble. Pour high and free, in all else you do in life too. It is those who fear, who slop over. Never fear anything and you'll never dribble." And reaching out his sound leg, he tipped with his foot the pail of water, still partly full, turning the contents upon the floor that Phoebe had made clean and sand-dry so short a time before.

"Now if you want water yourself, you can go and get it," chuckled he in grim enjoyment of his revenge. "You tried to keep it away from me all the morning—— Fear nothing! fear nobody!" repeated he.

"You'll be brought low some day," said Phoebe, repairing the damage with mop and pail. "Throwing away your manhood you are, with such childish trickery, instead of preparing for the Judgment day."

He laughed, his thin rasping laugh. "Go fry my doughnuts," said he, "the water'll dry up in time. And make them thick and big around, and enough of them. I never like doughnuts till they are old, and when they're old there never are any around this house. Hetty makes them too seldom and too thin, and she thinks they are not good for me—— It's not the doughnuts that hurt me, it's the hole in them, that gets bigger and bigger—and she doesn't fry the holes either, like Rebecca did. If I could get out there I'd show you how."

"I need no help from you on that job," replied Phoebe. "What I came in first to say was that they are tearing up the bridge on the river road; and the child best go the school-children's path far as the crossroads. In case she might turn down the way to the Island you'd better make her out a chart to follow."

"I'll give her full directions," said he, "without your aid," and he turned to Joan, who had been standing an astonished and silent witness of the old man's outburst. The mute reproach in the young fresh face stirred him, as the woman's sharp thrusts had not, and a faint flush swept up

over his wrinkled countenance at her quiet survey. But making no excuse nor apology for his outbreak, he mapped out the way on a bit of paper, giving her directions as to what turns she must make or avoid.

Joan loved the manner of his instructions. "It's so short and so plain," she thought. "He does things just the right way, and if he hadn't such a terrible temper I might learn not to be afraid of him."

"Don't loiter, I tell you," he called for a last word as she went out the garden gate. And forgetting for the instant the gulf of time that swept between them, his bluff and harsh manner, she turned, and waved her hand back in friendly motion of farewell, the spirit of childhood in the young friendly gesture. The old man started half up from his chair, as her face shone out clear above the stone fence, the involuntary smile born of the good-bye gesture, giving it a light he had not before noted.

"Gad!" he muttered, "she's like my sister."

"Her as you drove off from Halfway, or the other one?"

"Shut up," said he, "you're like a raven, about. Leave me and mine alone. Go do your work, and stay where you belong, woman!"

"I stay where I see I'm needed, and I go where I'm sent from above, do you hear that, Garret Wisdom! And if ever a man needed help it's you. If I'm to be the instrument employed, I'll speak out and spare not. What made you have her grandchild back? For no good purpose I'll be bound. Some scheme in it, unless you're beginning to repent and are trying to make amends. I hope it's that, but it's hard to believe. And now you can have yourself for company, for I'm ready to go about my work."

CHAPTER IV

THE FREEDOM OF THE OFFICE

JOAN turned off the highway by the clump of pines, as directed, and the school-children's path lay plain beyond the stile, across the pasture lands that belonged to Halfway, a winding narrow path, the path of little feet. What a crooked wandering way the small feet had taken, when a straight and direct course would have led them much sooner to school. But who ever wanted to hurry to school—a daisy bloom here, there a hare-bell's darling face, a clump of blazing rhododendron, a ground-sparrow's nest in a mossy hummock, or a strawberry ripe and red, had lured them aside as they walked; and where the first footprints trailed the others had followed, that they also might pluck and eat and gaze upon the joys of the wayside.

In such fashion are our paths determined, and our roadways made through Life, bending so, twisting and tortuous, and doubling back upon themselves—since who, for the sake of getting sooner and straighter to the end, would miss the hare-bells, and the berries ripe and red?

Joan and the path almost lost themselves by the brook, even though stepping stones led across it. Green lush plants were there, Sweet Flag, Iris, and fragrant Mint.

Joan's mother had played there, once; her grandmother, also; and her great-grandmother; three Joan Wisdoms, and all of them had loved the brook. And behind them another, but not a little girl as those three, for a bride she had come to Halfway, on the palfrey behind her husband, from the big brick house in town, with a trailing spray of red rose from its garden across her breast, as a memory of her home,

a runaway bride—and no dower followed her. Just they two, in the wilderness, with love, and willing heart and hand, had set up the Wisdom name in the countryside.

The slip of Red Rose grew, and multiplied, and was planted in every Wisdom garden. None of them know just why they love and tend it so, but a Wisdom man or woman, hard or indifferent as they may be to all else, will turn with brooding glance to the blowing rose so red; and every one of them as they bend above it can see the girl-bride, on the black horse, leaving home and wealth and ease behind; bringing from it all only the rose and the love in her heart, to the husband of her choice.

She, and the other Joans were long gone, but here was a new one, to play beside the brook that, whether Wisdoms came or went, went on itself, forever—ever.

Shut up in the big grey house all the week, it was gay to be out in the open again, with the green growing things and the blue skies that are ever the same friends no matter how lonely and strange all else may be, God's great gift to all His creatures over all His earth. She wished she did not have to hurry on her errand. There were beauty spots to explore on either hand, but the path kept straight on, now, as though it had dallied long enough and suddenly remembered what it had set out to do, be a short cut across the country; and its course led Joan to a great hardwood hill, up and over and down it, beside the brook once more, then up over a stile, and out into the old post-road along which Joan had rumbled in the mailcoach that misty morning.

She was thinking of it, and wondering if she would ever again ride in the highbacked box seat, when suddenly she came to that little narrow road with the steep hillsides clothed in pines, and though it bent and stretched on beyond her vision, she *could see it for a long way in, and saw herself walking it, with some one by the hand.* Who was it, and how could she thus picture it unless she had really been there! It was like striving to recall the lessons that so often

had slipped from her mind at school when the stern teachers would question, but those elusive things had been mere dates, and numbers, and letters of a word, while these others were like pictures in her mind's eye, with herself a part of them.

She wished her route lay down that narrow course. Did Uncle Garret have it marked on the chart he had given her? Yes, it was there, just beyond the stile, with "Don't turn here" printed plain upon the line. Perhaps it was what Phoebe had called "the Island road." She would ask her all about it, would perhaps ask Uncle Garret too, if he were not too unapproachable.

Now Joan turned the bend, and came abreast the Corner, a small cluster of buildings—one shop, a smithy, several dwellings, and the Post Office with sign above its battened doorway. Hitched to rail and post along the fence each side the office were the couriers' teams—two sulkies and a waggon, but no person was in sight about the doorway.

Joan entered the office and stepped up to the long narrow wicket that set amidships among the lettered little window-paned boxes wherein reposed His Majesty's mail—treasure-trove boxes, where you could not actually read the superscriptions upon the missives enclosed, therefore making it doubly and deliciously possible as you peered within that all the contents of an "S" or an "R" were for you alone. Evidently there were no seekers after treasure to-day, for the outer office was empty. But voices sounded from somewhere, and she approached nearer the wicket. "Is there any mail for Mr. Garret Wisdom?" she asked, her voice echoing clear in the stillness.

A tall large man rose from behind what seemed a pulpit-like structure, and came forward to the delivery window. He filled up the narrow opening to the very top. His glasses were halfway down his nose, his deep blue eyes peering out above them, and it seemed to Joan as if four sharp eyes were staring down upon her.

"My stars and senses!" ejaculated he, pushing his head

inside the wicket to get a closer view—"Who have we got here?" and reaching over he opened the communicating door. "Come in," said he, "come right in, child. Why it must be the newcomer at Halfway! We're glad to see you. Here Samuel"—to one of the three men who besides himself occupied the sacred precincts of the inner office—"this is the little girl who has come to Garret's."

"The Lord help her!" ejaculated Samuel devoutly, reaching forth a friendly hand from out the mail-bag which he was stuffing full of papers. "Favors the name all right, a blind man could see that," commented he.

"I am your Uncle's cousin, second or third," said the Postmaster. "I forget which, I'm no hand at tracing, but it makes you and me some kin all right, and I'm glad to see you. Sit right down in here with us, the mail is late to-day, George shoves along on his own gait and nobody can make him hurry—brought you down, he told us, about a week or more ago, and we've been trying to sort you out ever since; so many Wisdoms one way and another have gone off to other parts and raised up families and it's hard to keep track of them all unless you've a real gift for it.

"Here, sit up by the window," and he swept from an armchair a pile of papers. "Plague those 'Stars,' I hate 'Star' day. Every family in the countryside takes it, and it clutters us up so we've no room to be hospitable. Joel, come over and shake hands with our pretty lady here; and Stephen, get up and make your bow to her. Both of them your folks," he added as Joan gave the two big men a shy greeting, "though farther off than even I am, but we Wisdoms always like to have it reckoned on, no matter how distant. Joel, you get the papers all sorted for the routes, and be spry if you can, for we're late. Samuel, you tie up the letters and make out the waybills, and leave me a free hand to look after our visitor."

The visitor was feeling very much at home. Something in the good-natured atmosphere of the back office appealed

to her. Three strange men besides the Postmaster cousin, and yet every one of them her kindred! It almost seemed as if it was beginning to be like her expectations when they had told her at the dreadful School that she was going back to live with her relatives. Tossed about among so many different people all her life since a babe, the prospect of being with some one who might really love her and want her, had been a beautiful dream. Uncle Garret and Aunt Hetty had both shattered the vision, but here were these kindly men, and there must be others, too. Perhaps she could dare ask the Postmaster about some of them.

He was standing staring down upon her, his tall form erect as an oak, his arms folded high up across his broad breast, a puzzled look in his eyes. Suddenly his face brightened. "I think I've got you rightly placed," said he. "Your Cousin Louisa, that's my wife, was talking it over last night, not knowing I should so soon see you. George told us you had come from somewhere on the seaboard, he forgot the name. Garret would be your Great-Uncle, and you are the grandaughter of his sister Joan. She, and your own mother too, if I remember right, both married Wisdoms, not their own immediate folk, but the half-brother's family. Garret was dreadfully set against his sister's match. I don't know as he had anything to do about your mother's, for he was off in the gold-fields a good many years after the old Squire died, and Halfway was shut up. What was your father's christian name?"

"I don't think I know anything about him," answered Joan, "you see he died, and my mother, too, when I was only a baby."

"You don't tell me!" said Alexander kindly, "you've been without a home all that time! Well, I'm glad you've come here to the old place, where the family first started out. I never saw a truer make-up of them. Most of us are satisfied with one feature or trick of manner, but I've been looking you over, and you've got them all, features and style—

and what good qualities they have, too, I haven't a doubt," he added gallantly. "The only other one I ever saw so strongly marked was a little girl Cousin Polly Ann brought back with her once——" And here the Postmaster drew his brows together again in puzzled thought, then unbent them with an illuminating smile overspreading his countenance.

"Why, you'd be that very child," said he. "Do you remember ever being here, about five years old you would be, I reckon, and pretty young to keep it in mind, but the Wisdoms are powerful for remembering. Polly Ann was a cousin of your grandmother's and must have had you in charge, and she thought maybe Aunt Debbie, where she brought you, would keep you, as she had no children of her own, but not she! Debbie's gone now, and we won't talk behind her back, but when Polly Ann went into town for a visit and left you behind, Debbie used to pasture you out on the neighbourhood, never seemed to find out herself what good company you were; that was her way, she missed things right through life like that—cold and calculating and stern —what you call a Puritan. Remember the day she sent you down to visit us, and you threw your nightie behind the parlour table? We live on the road where you turn off by the oak clump of three."

Remember! Why of course she did! and Joan heard him with a riot of other recollections—*That* was why she knew those trees! and the bridge over the river! and the mill! But why had no one ever told her she had been here before! It must have been because they had not known it themselves, for she had lived with strangers mostly, from "pillar to post" as Uncle Garret had said, and being so young it was small wonder the past had faded from her mind in ten long years. She could ask all about it, now, though, from this fine kindly man, her Cousin Alexander. What a lot of things he would be able to tell her! And she turned eagerly toward him.

But he talked on, giving her no opportunity of speech. "We should some of us have taken you at that time," said

he; "I remember thinking so myself, but we all had our own affairs, someway, and there didn't seem any 'room in the Inn' for you, Wisdom though you were. We heard about Polly Ann's death, soon after you went back, and I felt kind of conscience pricked at the word, but had forgot all about it since, and never connected the two of you when I heard Garret had taken a girl, till I saw you stand out there in the wicket window, and it recalled to me somebody, I couldn't think who, at first. Do you recollect the time you went in wading in the river and lost your shoes and stockings?"

"You don't give her a chance to remember"—interrupted Samuel. "Let her have a show to speak up for herself, or give some of the rest of us an inning—— How is Uncle Garret to-day? I'll bet he's cussing because the mail is late and his 'Free Press' delayed. Good company he could be too, if he'd only let himself give out what's good in him—but he's always set against somebody or something, of late, and bitter and hard. Got a second wife, too, how he does it I don't know, I've only had one myself, and she wouldn't live with me a day if I carried on like Garret does. I expect it's largely his money and that big house, and he sets a bountiful table I understand. He didn't live here when you were around that time, if it was really you. He was off to the Coast, and in the Klondike region and across to the old country too, I guess, was almost a stranger amongst us when he came back with his bride number two to end his days on the old place that was his father's and his grandfather's before him—shut up for twenty years or more the house was, and gone to wreck and ruin if it hadn't been built so solid and grand."

"You're not giving her any more of an opening than I did," said the Postmaster.

"I'll soon be through," answered Samuel. "I just want to ask how she gets on with Aunt Hetty. A still mouthed little woman, your Aunt Hetty is. Men like Garret always have the luck! What they need and ought to have is one

who'll talk up to them, but they generally get a meek soul they can impose upon. What Garret Wisdom needs, and in my opinion he'll never be fit for Heaven till he gets it, is some one to bring him to his knees." He paused for a moment, and looked keenly across at the young girl. "Maybe it's you are to do it," said he thoughtfully. "Maybe that's why you were sent. I believe we're all 'sent,' for some special work, but we take our own head for it and get off the road and out of hearing of the 'orders.' Maybe it's *you* who will bring him to himself, for he has many shortcomings to answer for, and has been 'in a far country.' "

"There, there!" interrupted Cousin Alexander, "you shouldn't prejudice the court that fashion. If she lives at Halfway long enough she'll find out a point or two herself, and from what little things I remember of her that other time, mite though she was, I reckon perhaps she'll be able to take care of herself, all right. I never said the Wisdoms couldn't ever get *into* a hole, but I do say they can always get *out.* That day you was sent down to visit us," said he to Joan, "you didn't think you ought to take your nightie along, because it looked too much like asking for lodgings. I don't know how you ever sensed it, young as that, but you did, and finding front door and parlour door both open you threw it way behind the round table in the parlour; and we thought you had just come for the day. But when we got acquainted you confessed your doings, and told us how you felt and fared up at Debbie's, so we took you off her hands for a day or two. Recollect it? And when you lost your shoes and stockings one time when you were in wading and told her the tide came up and took them off, she thought 'twas a lie, and wouldn't believe it was only because you had lived by the seashore always, and naturally thought the tides were in all waters—and it was the best way you knew to get out of that 'hole,' see! That's what I was saying——"

But here came a sound of stamping outside, a clatter of

heavy feet in the outer office, and His Majesty's mail borne upon the shoulders of George, filled up the little doorway.

The Postmaster seemed concerned for a moment, then reaching out a hand to Joan he led her up to the pulpitlike structure. "Sit right in behind here," said he. "There is not supposed to be anybody unofficial round when we sort the mail, it's clear against the law. But we'll have to waive rules this time, or break our manners, for the folks will soon be in for their papers and they'd stare you out of countenance if we put you out there on the bench. When you come again we'll have you sign a form, and send it up to headquarters, and then you'll be bonafide help, all right—good help, too, I would think."

"That's all right," assented George by a friendly nod, renewing his acquaintance with Joan. "Trust Alexander to get help out of folks, always getting a lift, he is."

"Hard on him having to be Postmaster, though," said Samuel, "when he feels himself he was cut out for a parson." For sitting next the pulpit, Samuel judged he should continue a conversation with Joan while the bags were being unlocked and emptied. The mail for the Corner itself was light, but it was a distributing centre, and seven mail-routes radiated from the small office.

"He was a sort of lay-preacher once," explained Samuel, "licensed and all, but he preached too long and he preached too hard and the people wouldn't stand for it——Once a man from up county came in late; Alexander was at his 'thirdly,' but seeing the man and knowing he didn't often get to meeting, he began the sermon all over again for his benefit, and kept the people way past dinnertime. That was his finish, and he was asked by the circuit to quit. But he's always hankered after meeting-houses and their appurtenances, and when old Zion was built over last fall he got this pulpit-shell, cheap, and the cushioned seat behind it, and we wouldn't know how to keep office now without it. Good-snug place it is, and the first time that Alexander ever let

anybody but himself sit on that mercy-seat! You look comfortable."

Joan felt comfortable. She liked to hear their speech, so plain and to the point, and yet so picturelike. It was so strange and wonderful, too, about her being here before—that other time—what seemed to her such a very long while ago. And as they talked on among themselves, and opened, and sorted, and filled up the little lettered pigeonholes with the precious missives, and the yawning canvas bags for the regions beyond, with others; all the while, as she watched and listened, she too was sorting out the bits of memory, which at first seemed just like fancy.

But before any of them had shaped plain, here was Cousin Alexander with the Halfway mail tied round with a string. "George is going to give you a lift," said he. "Garret has never had to wait this long for his 'Free Press,' and he'll not be any too chipper over it, so you best get back quick as you can. George has to go round the millroad on account of the bridge being out. He'll set you down at the brook and from there on it will be easy to follow to the stile. It'll give you a chance to look up those shoes and stockings by the mill creek, if the tide is out!" and Alexander laughed long and hearty. "She never forgot it, never forgave you, always called it a lie, did Debbie—that's the way with the Wisdoms—never forget, never forgive—we all have to fight it, and only the grace of God helps us out." And with a kindly handshake the Postmaster had gone about his business, and Joan was once more on the high-backed box-seated waggon, this time in front, beside the Mailman.

CHAPTER V

ROADSIDE DREAMS

GEORGE was not a communicative person, of his own accord, perhaps from native shyness, born also from the long and often solitary rides through the deep woods in the late and early hours of his daily route. So they "shoved along" rather silently for awhile, Joan still puzzling in her mind over the episodes the Postmaster had told her of that former visit, as yet mere fragments of memory, broken and intangible and hard to match up; her gaze roaming meantime over the scenes they were passing through—orchard and stream and meadow, and the long driveways leading to the houses that were almost out of sight at the far end. Where she had lived her childhood years, there had been few sheltering trees; in the bare and ugly school town no approach to the small new dwellings; and the air of seclusion and self-containment about these homes, so remote from the highway, instinctively appealed to the girl, who was of a race content and sufficient in themselves.

"What a lot of room there is for everybody!" she exclaimed, as they drove past a house perched upon the top of a great round hill, the roadway to it branching off the main thoroughfare far below, and girdling the hill to join it farther along. "Don't you love to live here?" she asked.

"Someways I do and someways I don't," said George. "I haven't been around these parts all my life, went away to the States when a youngster, too young, I know now, for I should have stayed to home and got my schooling instead of itching for earnings as I did. I only came back about five years ago, because my mother was ailing and wanted me;

she and I batch it together way down at the Bend. The slump came on in the States just as I was getting on my feet, and so I couldn't lay anything by, and here I am now without either schooling or money to my name. But the Postmaster threw the mail-route my way, and we get on tolerably well for poor folks. We'd be pleased to have you come down to visit us."

"I'll come," said Joan, "and I think I'd like to go into every house we've passed. Do you know who lives in them all, like you knew all the people we met that day I came?"

The mailman smiled good-naturedly down upon his passenger. "I know who lives in all the houses," said he, "for they have been in the same name mostly, quite a way back, but I don't know in person all the folks I meet as I drive along, because you don't have to be acquainted with them to pass the time of day, it's what we call 'courtesies of the road,' just a friendly how-do-you-do way that we have in the country. There's another saying something like it—'journeying mercies', which means the help we always get as we travel along. You see now, it's a 'courtsey of the road' for me to give you this lift, and it's a 'journeying mercy' to you to get it—and to me too to have it, I guess," he finished in simple gallant proffer. "I wish you were going further. I was thinking, afterward, that I might have been more sociable the day I brought you down, seeing as you were alone and a stranger, but having a man passenger besides, kind of took my mind off my manners, and I'm not much of a hand to talk to the ladies. We'll have to go over the route again sometime, and I'll tell you who lives in all the places. Speaking of the 'journeying mercy' being a kind of a doubledecker this time, makes me think of what Captain Nat told me yesterday. He was going into town and his waggon broke down and he had to leave it for repairs, so he started to walk on, and hadn't got far when a team overtook him.

" 'Can't you give me a lift?' he asked.

" 'I can, but I don't want to,' answered the driver short

and gruff. But you can't ever ruffle Nat——. 'Sometimes it's good for us to do what we don't want to,' said he, and it kind of staggered the man. 'Well, get up then,' he growled, 'and ride to the crossroads.' But Nat wasn't let out at the crossroads. 'For I'll be blowed,' said Nat when he was telling us, 'I'll be blowed if he didn't take me chuck to town!' and you'd think to hear him tell it that he hadn't a notion of an idea what good company he was. Why the man who couldn't appreciate his 'mercies' in having Nat along, wouldn't know if his own bread was buttered or bare!"

This was a lengthy effort of speech for George, and reflected his enjoyment of his bright-eyed, pleasant spoken little passenger. His inclination would have led him into silence for a time to collect his thoughts, but Joan was eager for information.

"Who is Captain Nat?" she asked. "Is he anybody I'll be knowing?"

"I wouldn't wonder. He's some relation, but hasn't got the same name as you have. That house up on the high hill was his place. He and his sister Hannah live there since he gave up sea-going. He sailed his ship once to the West Indies and they got the yellow-jack aboard someway; all of his crew took it on the voyage back. He nursed and buried every one of them, and brought the vessel home to port lone-handed; then came on with it himself. It was a terrible experience and kind of took the taste out of sailing, and so he settled down on the old place."

"Is it a nice place, would there be lots of things off of ships, up there?"

"Wouldn't there!" exclaimed George. "Well, I guess that's just where they are—not full sized ships maybe! but full rigged ones in glass cases, and tiny ones in bottles, and pink conch-hells all around the door-steps, chunks of coral, and compasses and things, so you'd almost think you was afloat. It's a great place to go, and the Captain as sociable and friendly as you'd ask for. He wasn't that mild when he first

came back, had a daring way with him that belongs to sea-going I guess, and drank some too, I've heard, but he's stopped all that now, and I'll tell you how it came about. They were having a tea meeting up at the church grounds, a great spread of cakes and pies set out on long tables, and all the fixings of wreaths of flowers and wax-berries round them, and the rest of the sweet stuff that always goes on at tea-meetings. Well, up comes the Captain, his head foolish with drinking, and when one of the women asked him for a subscription to the fund they were raising, it made him mad, someway, and he walked up to the tables and lifted his foot and kicked them over, cakes and pies and all, every one of them onto the floor.

" 'What's the whole darned shot worth?' said he, 'and I'll pay it all!' "

"And when they told him a hundred and fifty dollars he takes out his wallet cool as could be, and counted it out to them, every dollar to a cent—don't know how he happened to have that much on him, but he did. 'Now get out of here, you money changers,' said he, and he lifted up his foot again but there wasn't anybody in sight to kick, for they had cleared outside, afraid he had gone plum crazy. And just then the batch of miners came along, for the supper they were expecting to have served them, and Nat called out to them,——

" 'Come in and get your fill,' said he. 'It's all mine. I've bought it out—— And when you're through don't forget to pick up the fragments.'

"It didn't take them long to get busy. They cleared out the place of eatables like a swarm of locusts, and most of them with a frosted cake under their arm as they went off, its wreath of posies on their caps. It was a funny sight, I've heard, and no loss in it all, for the women had set their price pretty high. But it sobered Nat, and was his last fling, I guess, in public, anyway. Nobody ever saw him that way before, nor since either, far as I've heard."

But here Joan suddenly cried out in exclamation at sight of a small building set in the midst of a barren rocky lot not far from the river, a strange little abode, looking like a ship's cabin stranded upon the rocks, no paint upon its weather-beaten sides, but everything scrupulously clean and neat all about it.

"O, does anybody live there?" she asked.

"That's queer too," said George, "for us to be talking about the sea just now, for the woman who owns that place we call the Skipper; her husband was a coaster captain and lost his schooner and cargo and went kind of soft-headed on it. He couldn't ever sail again, being sillylike, and it bothered him to be along shore where he'd always lived, so he came here, him and his wife, and built that forecastle thing of a house. He's dead long ago, when I was a boy, but she stays on, a queer sort herself, never talks to you, and has a black look always on her face. She chores out by the day and picks up a living, about the only extra help the women folks have got around here."

"Why, I thought Phoebe worked out," said Joan.

"Phoebe!" ejaculated George. "That's a good one! You don't know Phoebe, or you wouldn't say that!"

"She's at our place now," explained Joan, rather discomforted at her companion's hearty enjoyment of her remark.

"I don't doubt that's so, but she doesn't work out, as you call it. O, no! not Phoebe—she goes and takes charge, wherever and whenever she's a mind to; but she's a Wisdom, she thinks, and high and mighty in her ways."

"Is she married?" asked Joan.

"Not to speak of. She likes to run her own affairs too well. She and Captain Nat are sweet on each other, been courting for about forty years, but Phoebe won't hitch up long as Hannah has to stay on the homestead, and Hannah, I guess the Lord must have forgot her, for she's too old to be around, but is smart on her feet as a youngster, and cranky as a steer. Nat is dreadfully good to her, though,

and Phoebe is missing a fine husband all these years, but Phoebe is Phoebe, and when her head is set one way you can't get her feet to go another. The Skipper has got a girl with her that she took from the poor-house I guess, long ago, a nice spoken little thing she is too, about your age, but a bit lame and rather frail looking; she'll never make old bones I reckon."

Here they reached the fork of the roads, where Joan was to be set down.

"Don't forget to come see us," said he, gathering up the reins, "We'd be proud to have you. Keep right along the river bank till you strike the path.—On, Robin, on! On, Sparrow, on!" and with a crack of his whip to each sorrel steed he and His Majesty's mail rumbled off along the old post-road.

"And I don't know when I've enjoyed a passenger more," he summed up, retailing the afternoon's experience to his mother that night. "She looked sedate as a basket of chips there in the office but was chirpy as a cricket out in the open, sociable as you'll ask for, but not free—just like all the Wisdoms; you'd think you were great cronies with one of them and suddenly they put up that wall between you as though you'd ought to beg to even peep over at them. It can't be all a Wisdom fashion, either, for that girl at the Skipper's has the same way with her. She's often under the bridge, washing, or at the cabin, when I pass, and I'll call out something gay with my good-morning or good-night, and she'll toss back as good, but if I undertake to follow it up with another, up goes some kind of a 'fence' all around her. You'd call it haughty if she wasn't a workhouse kid and washing clothes for a living. It's good to have, though, in a girl; teaches them to take care of themselves. I'd say this one up at Halfway would be a great help up there, and change the Squire round from his gruff ways, maybe."

Joan did not follow down the river bank, as the mailman

had directed. She sat instead prone upon the shelving rock by the roadside, for directly in front of her was the oak tree clump of three, and at sight of it suddenly the mist cleared from her memory, and as if someone was spreading it out before her like a panorama, the memories began to unroll, slowly at first, as she fumbled back through the drear lonely years of her young life—back past the ugly School, where they wore striped uniforms like a prison, and had heavy work and light play and few studies—back through the different houses where she had served to fetch and carry with people who neither loved nor wanted her—beyond them to the one the Postmaster had called Polly-Ann, who had brought her here. And though she was so very far back in that dream life, Joan could see her now, quite plain, a little bright-eyed woman with curls tied up in a bunch behind each ear, wherever she went carrying work-basket, book and fan. Could see also the person he had called Debbie, whom Polly-Ann and she had visited and whom Joan herself had not liked. Nor had she liked the soup she was made to eat there each day, thickened with barley, like porridge; nor the patchwork she was taught to piece and overhand so fine; nor the long dreary Sunday when she would have to go to the church, carrying the queer square foot-stove full of charcoals, all the way, to place in the high square pew, for "Debbie" suffered with cold feet, and in summer and winter must have her foot-stove always at hand.

Then there were all those "boastful Wisdom houses," as Aunt Hetty had dubbed them, where Joan had been sent to visit, "farmed out," the Postmaster called it, and she could recall some of them now, the low spread-out one, beyond the bridge, where lived a merry hearted old pair who once had a flock of boys and girls of their own, and for their sake had made the little stranger welcome, giving her the freedom of the cookie-crock, and letting her go often as she liked into the long lovely parlour where heavy red curtains hung at the windows, and gay broidered ottomans sat about the room.

Upon the mantel were wonderful plaster-of-paris images, wide-mouthed bottles of West India shells and lucky-beads, and two curious balls of smelly fragrant brown that took much examining by the small fingers before Joan discovered them to be clove-apples, red juicy apples filled up close with the aromatic sticks that drying their juice preserved their shape and fragrance. Even if the small fingers now and then extracted a clove just to see if it *would* come out, nobody had minded, while at Debbie's she had never been allowed alone inside the grand best-room. They could not be very far apart, those two places, for she had gone there every morning for the kettle of milk, and the kettle would be well set with cream often before she would be willing to retrace her steps down the long walk where columbines and bouncing Betseys grew a-row, and out onto the highway through a hole in the high thorn hedge, because she could not swing back the heavy gates. She could see it all in her mind's eye now, plain as plain could be. Where had it been stowed away to be so long forgotten!

And that visit to Cousin Alexander's—why it seemed as if the oak trees called an "open sesame" to it, for she could fairly feel herself starting reluctantly away, obedient to the immovable will of Debbie, her nightgown in a tight roll under her arm, with orders to remain over night. To be sent to a stranger's, uninvited! And not even to have her one best nightgown with the frills, was the crown of all the miserable business! It appeared no longer ago than yesterday she had trudged her unwilling little feet over the shelving, shaly road, past the tall oak clump, and on up the byway that led to her destination.

All the rest of it, that her host himself had related at the office, the garlanded knocker up so high that she could not reach it, and the door yielding to her push revealing the open parlour with its high round table where an uninvited nightie might securely hide, how clear she could see it. But how could she ever have thought of the way out of her difficulty

so young! And Joan did not know that it was just the way of her blood, and that a Wisdom always puts his best foot forward even if an orphan friendless one of five. Far fleeter than she could have put them into words the memories came crowding back, piece after piece fitting into place as she sat by the warm shaly roadside, matching them up. The shoes and stockings story that the Postmaster had laughed at, wouldn't seem to come out plain, yet, and there was something she knew she should recall about that dear, shady road she had been directed not to turn down, something that was a troubling thought. O what a beautiful place it was beginning to be, with real folks of her very own to love and to visit; and to pick up the threads let drop so long ago was almost like having a truly Home that might now go on and on, if only she could make Uncle Garret and Aunt Hetty be satisfied with her.

But the thought of the great-uncle, querulous and suffering and harsh, waiting for his paper while she dreamed her dreams by the roadside, filled her with dismay at her loitering, and she hurried on fearfully, running outright till she reached the pine-bordered avenue, and Halfway.

CHAPTER VI

CAPTAIN NAT HOLDS HIS OWN

THE Fortune that provides for the lame and the lazy surely favoured Joan on this occasion, for though she had without doubt idled by the way, expecting to meet for retribution a stern and irate Uncle, she found to her surprise on reaching the side verandah where he usually sat through the afternoon that he was not there, nor was his rocker, the big extra one with the broad arms, and the wider foot-rest that supported his feet when the lame leg did not need elevation. It was used to draw him back and forth to his room, and when he had been helped from out it to his easy-chair, was always taken back to the verandah again at once, for Uncle Garret carried on all his workings by rule, and allowed no exceptions, either. The wing-room doors were closed, both of them, and it was so still, all about, with the petulant censorious presence gone, no sound nor stir to break the drowsy hum of the summer afternoon.

It puzzled Joan, and she sat down for a moment on the steps to rest from her breathless run up hill, wondering if she dared go direct into his rooms or should go around by the house entrance; so stern and unbending he had been to her that she hardly knew how much liberty to venture upon. Yet here was his mail, the "Free Press," and several large important looking letters; he ought not to wait longer for them. Perhaps he might be having a bad attack again, in his bedroom, and needing help. Lifting the latch with a hesitating hand she pushed open the door, but his room was empty, so was the adjoining office, where as Stipendiary for the District he held "court" as he was wont to term it. Twice

since Joan had come to Halfway there had been a group of men assembled there, talking and arguing in loud voice; all up the long driveway horses and waggons made fast by haltered rope around a restraining tree. "Looking for all the world like Divine Service, if you didn't know where you was coming to"—Phoebe had sniffed sarcastically to Aunt Hetty as she ran their gauntlet on her last turn at Halfway.

But the empty office and the solitary lane told Joan there was no "court" in session. Only once had she seen him in the other part of the house, and that had been when he was drawn out for dinner on her first day at Halfway. Where could he be now, in the middle of an afternoon, and his own rooms deserted and closed! Then she heard the sound of voices, remote and faint, and passing out the entry, through the long passage-way between, came to the front hall, into which she had never set foot since her arrival but which now stood open. It was a long wide apartment, with little alcoves set in on either side, as if niches for statues, but wherein no figures reposed, only vases of ripened grass stalks in each,—grass-o'-the-fields, heavy bearded, feathery and fragrant. The broad striped strip of carpet, home-woven, home-coloured, and gay and bright as if just from dye-pot and loom instead of fifty years underfoot, shone glowing and rich against the oak panelled walls and the heavily planked floor.

Its big entrance door stood open, the upper half, swinging inward, and Joan could see from out it the vistaed avenue of balm o' Gileads with stretching branches that met o'er-head. This entrance was not often used, the post-road which once it led to having been swerved to the right, where the long pine-bordered lane made a more direct approach to the portion of Halfway that Uncle Garret himself occupied. Joan had wandered round there once, but had not seen the big door open, nor been inside the spacious hall.

From one of the rooms at either side came the distant voices she had heard, distinct now, the great-uncle's austere argumentative pitch, and another with a full pleasant unctu-

ous cadence about it that drew her straight to whence it came, regardless of consequences.

Uncle Garret was there, in the broad arm-chair; Phoebe also, sitting in state in the very middle of a long sofa; and over by one of the windows a stranger, a man about Uncle Garret's age, with quaint looking smooth face, an abundance of curly iron-grey locks, and an inscrutable smile that burst into frequent and hearty laugh when released from the corners of his tight set lips.

There was no opportunity to present her to the visitor, for as Joan stood in the doorway he called out to her himself.

"Come here, my pretty," said he with extended hands. "I've come up to Halfway especially to call upon you. I'm Captain Nat, your cousin."

"Several times removed," interjected Uncle Garret, "and on the other side at that. Don't take more than is coming to you."

"Half or whole, as you like," replied the new relative with a hearty hand shake for Joan. "I've got the strain if I haven't got the name. But this little girl here has got both sides of us in her makeup, and the name too. Have you seen your Grandfather's folks yet?"

"What she needs to learn about them I'll tell her myself, do you understand?" said Uncle Garret with asperity.

But the speech and the look intended to wither Captain Nat in his boots, showed no effect whatever in his suave rejoinder.

"If she's been for the mail I bet she got an ear full already, from Alexander. He's like the rain that falls from Heaven, he loves us all and doesn't sort us out according to our sins."

"Don't get wrangling about them," put in Phoebe, "or she'll not take to either side of the family."

"You're not asked for an opinion," replied Uncle Garret, reaching out for the mail which Joan still held.

"This is 'Star' day, and 'Free Press' day too," remarked

Captain Nat, noticing that Phoebe was warming to the fray and thinking it best to avoid a fracas between the two before the young stranger. "I'm glad you enjoy the 'Free Press' regular, Garret," as the latter periodical dropped from Uncle Garret's hand and outspread upon the floor. "There's a great editorial in it this week, good sound politics."

"I don't read the 'Free Press' for political information," retorted the great-uncle, caught red handed in possession of the contentious sheet. "It gives me the news around the countryside, and shut up as I am it's some company to know what is going on among the people. I can't do much reading now since my neck is stiff with the rheumatism."

"When I came up to the piazza," said Captain Nat, not seeming able to resist stirring up the nest even though he should himself be stung in return, "I thought you were reading your Bible, and was glad to notice it; the 'Free Press,' all through, and your Bible, Garret, are the only reading you need."

"The man who reads the 'Free Press' through would *have* to read his Bible," replied Uncle Garret without further comment. The visitor was undoubtedly foiled, and tried his bow again.

"I met Hetty up the road this morning, along by Dempsey's Corner, had your best waggon out, the top buggy, and your black mare. I didn't know you ever let that out unless it was carrying yourself. The sun was glistening on it so bright, I thought it might be the Coronation Coach got out of London someway. The mare was stepping off fine, too."

Joan trembled with consternation, and threw Phoebe a quick beseeching glance. Was it to be repeated here, the forenoon's storm and invective against poor little Aunt Hetty and them all! If only Phoebe would throw herself into the breach, but Phoebe evidently was not averse to the show, and Joan was afraid to venture in unbidden.

"Hetty is a good hand with horses," said Uncle Garret,

calmly; "all her people were, could manage any creature they had the reins over."

Joan gasped again, this time with astonishment. She looked at Phoebe. She looked at the old Uncle, with puzzled glance, and then, young though she was, saw through it all. "The blessed old thing," she thought, "to pass it off that way so cool and composed, when he was really and truly so angry about it all. He would manage his own affairs, his wife included, as well as his rheumatic leg! and Captain Nat was not to have any tales to tell—Wasn't it fine, and wasn't it funny!" Phoebe gave a short cackling laugh half under her breath, but Joan heard it, and the little crooked smile that in spite of herself had lurked in the corners of her own lips, suddenly outspread and made her face blossom like a flower. But Uncle Garret's countenance, if he heard or noted either, gave no sign, and his tormentor, though disappointed in the effect of this news he had rolled under his tongue like a sweet morsel for Uncle Garret's nestling, did not push it further.

"Off on a visit, I suppose," said he good-naturedly. "I hope she'll get our way before long and bring down the little cousin. I must be getting off myself, soon, or I'll not be back by night. It's queer but I haven't ever got used to the dark that's over the land at night, being so long at sea, I suppose, where we have the whole sky full of stars around us and a moon to ourselves every now and then—so I always aim to be in easy reach of home when twilight falls. Hetty must be a good housekeeper to get away as often as she does, and so early in the day," with a side glance at Phoebe.

"Hetty knows who she leaves in charge," replied that worthy with asperity, "but she knows too how to manage things, herself, and is a quick worker when she is home."

"They always were forehanded, her folks," said Captain Nat. "Her mother was the smartest woman in the settlement. I've heard Hannah say she got to having the washing done on Saturdays to get ahead of her neighbours, and while

they were steaming in suds on Monday she would be in her white apron, ironing, and baking in between to use up the heat. Then she did it on Fridays and her sweeping Thursday, and got so smart finally she got back to where she started from, and kept on chasing herself that way, all the rest of her life. But nothing ever interfered with her visiting, and Hetty is like her in that. Better get her down soon to see us, Garret, so our new cousin here can have a visit with us," and he turned to Joan. "You'd enjoy a few days on the hill," said he; "all kinds of foreign trinkets in the house to look at, and a good safe old horse you could learn to ride on if you cared to. Ever ride a horse?"

Ride a horse! She certainly had not. He might as well have asked if she had a kingdom to offer for one! Would she like it, well rather! and joy for the very thought of it shone in her eyes as she answered him. "Oh, I'd love to so much, I've never done anything like that, nor had any real fun"—and then she stopped suddenly, abashed that she should have spoken out so frankly before them all.

But she had not been able to hide the pathos of her tone.

"Well, well," exclaimed Captain Nat kindly, "then it's high time we all began to give it to you, or you'll get grown up without it. The time to pack aboard real fun is when you're young, or you're like a ship without ballast to meet the winds and waves that sweep you later on. I'll bet you'd ride well, too. You have a fearless eye, and a tight grip in your fingers I noticed when you shook hands with me—and you and the old white horse will get on fine."

"She does not need to go from Halfway for a mount," said Uncle Garret with asperity, "and as for 'fun', as you call it, she has not come to me to go riding all over the countryside. I'll attend to her pleasures myself, when the time comes for them."

"Hoity, toity!" exclaimed the Captain, "you're on a high nag yourself, just now! Linked up as she is with us all, we've each got the claim to offer our hospitality and make her

feel glad she came amongst us. If she's as much of a Wisdom as she looks, she'll be riding a horse all right of her own accord, without you or me to hinder or help. When we're young we itch to get onto everything and into everything there is going," said he to Joan. "Kind of a power in us, and the dare to prove it. Ever feel it yet? If you do, and haven't been able to try yourself out, why now's your chance. Phoebe here will teach you how to spin, and weave too, kind of old-fashioned accomplishments maybe, but your grandmother could weave at twelve, I've heard, and had a small loom built for her on purpose, didn't she, Garret? Hannah was speaking of it only yesterday, and telling me about that unlucky piece that's set up in the loom-room."

"It is not necessary for you to do the hospitalities for Halfway. I'm still in charge here, do you understand!" said Uncle Garret. If he did or not, the douse, cold though it was, rolled off Captain Nat as if he were the proverbial duck. So Uncle Garret made another strike. "It is as if I were to interfere with yours and Phoebe's courting," said he.

Captain Nat understood that, and with a somewhat abashed look askance at the sofa, a pink colour like a child's crept into his round face and mounted to his broad brow over which hung the abundant locks. He stirred uneasily. "I must be going," said he.

"Well, blast you, go! Who's hindering you!" roared the master of Halfway, exasperated at the several attempts at withdrawal that had failed to come off, and eager for perusal of his mail so long withheld.

Richard was himself again, for this last thrust had been above the heart, and Captain Nat settled back in his chair once more. "As I was about to say," said he turning to Joan, "Let them bring you down some day very soon, my dear, and we'll get that horse broken in. You surely favour the one whose name you bear, as I remember her. And yet you are like your grandfather's side too, the Island folks."

"She hasn't a feature nor a fancy like them," said Uncle

Garret, "and I wouldn't have her in my house if she had."

"O, well," remarked his visitor placidly, "have it as you will. Your eyesight is failing fast, but I haven't noticed your spleen is any the worse for wear. Now, I really must be going, or the night will catch me——" and with a hearty and generous hand-shake around, was up and off, with a quick short step, down the long hall, and out through the passageway to Uncle Garret's own side door, whistling in suggested thought of the approaching night, the rollicking air of the popular refrain that had just come to the country-side, "I'm afraid to go home in the dark."

Phoebe gave a suppressed giggle of admiring appreciation at the aplomb of her departing swain in thus defying his host, and an outright titter as the strains of the ridiculous song floated back to their ears.

"Blast him, why didn't he go out the way I let him in!" snarled Uncle Garret; "always saucy and free, as if he owned the earth. A man who has sailed his own vessel isn't fit to be around on land with other people. He's too cock-sure and masterful."

"Queer too, being a Wisdom," said Phoebe grimly. "I wonder now where he'd get a streak like that."

"Pull out my chair," commanded Uncle Garret, "and then come back and chain up the door again. The impudence of him trotting out that side door, after all my trouble and pain in getting in here at the front." And all the while the woman drew his chair down the bright-striped carpet, he scolded and argued with her, their wrangling voices sounding back even after they reached his own room.

Presently Phoebe returned, and found Joan looking over the half-door. "Masterful!" sniffed she—"I know who's masterful, and proud and silly—made me pull him way in here, and wouldn't let me open the side door to Nat but had him walk round to this one that is almost never opened up. Said he wouldn't have him call on you at the back way. 'I know what befits my station, and hers, and so does Nat,' said

he, 'and if he has come to see her he'll see her in the proper place,' and no arguing could change it. But Nat is wise—he hasn't sailed a ship load of men for nothing, and he knows a bully from a clown, so he never showed any surprise at the state, but carried on conversation polite as could be for awhile, weather and crops and the folks around; but they were getting well nigh aground for subjects when you showed up, and on edge with each other, and had to have a clash or two or it wouldn't be natural. I brag on Nat going out that side door, though; in the end he always gets his own way in that queer easy fashion, without any storm about it either, like Garret has. You'll enjoy a visit with him great."

"If Aunt Hetty couldn't take me, why you and I might go, some time," said Joan. She would have liked to say something too, about the long courting George had told her of, had she dared, but Phoebe was a comparative stranger, as yet, and she did not want to offend her, for perhaps Phoebe could tell her about those dream-like people she had been recalling to-day, and perhaps about the Island relations also whom Uncle Garret did not like.

"When I go to the Hill farm," said Phoebe with a toss of her head, "I go to stay, and I guess that will never be, for I'll not live there while Hannah, his sister, does, and Hannah is setting up to be a mummy, and will never die off, it's my opinion."

Just here Uncle Garret's summons for Joan sounded out. "It's likely water he wants," said Phoebe. "He'll have his jug filled fresh before he starts in on the 'Free Press,' for he wears himself out over that every Friday, swearing and muttering, and contending every word, and he'd burn up inside if he hadn't a cool drink at hand. Captain Nat he owns the paper, but he doesn't edit it, nor run it himself. You saw how he jollied Garret about it, though, and that will make him madder than ever to-day. When you come back from the spring I'll show you round the parlors, while he's blowing off steam."

But Joan did not return to the hall, for when she had brought him the water, Uncle Garret ordered her to shut the door between, and to go out on his own piazza to sit.

"I don't choose to have you around hearing all that woman's gossip," said he. "If you have any questions to ask, ask them of your equals always, you understand. Whether I am in hearing or not I'll always find out, and I forbid it."

Phoebe closed and chained the great door, both portions, went back into the drawing-room and put the chairs in place, and waited for Joan, but she did not appear; so making an excuse to go round by the piazza she saw her sitting there upon the steps reading.

"If that isn't Wisdom for you, and boiled down at that, then I don't know them!" said she to herself. "Sociable and eager as a child for your company, then sudden shut up like a clam. Silly, and proud, all of them are, saving those who have got enough other blood mixed in to have common sense. Proud, is she! well, what's sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander!" And not knowing that poor little Joan was a prisoner in the Vatican, even her speech silenced so she could not explain, Phoebe passed her without so much as a glance. And there was not a sign of the fresh baked cakes for the tea which she presently spread upon the big round table, only bread and butter and apple-sauce, which Joan was left to eat in solitary state. Thus just as she was beginning to find and make a friend, Uncle Garret had spoiled it all, unless Phoebe should relent and choose to come again under the sweet and wistful sway of that flower smile that had its roots deep in Joan's heart and only when drawn from thence burst into bloom over her small dark face.

CHAPTER VII

LIFE'S STORES OF EXPERIENCE

IT was near closing time at the Post Office. The couriers had gone out on their respective routes, and only Silas and Joel, who usually sat out the afternoon with him, were left for the Postmaster's company. The big table had been cleared of the day's litter, the mail-bags hung in ordered row, and the Postmaster himself was behind his pulpit righting up cash-box and stamps, when Captain Nat's round smooth face appeared at the wicket window.

"Come right in here, Nattie," called out Silas, doing the honours for the Government. "Well, if Nattie isn't all dressed up, bow-tie and patent leathers—been to see the girls I guess! How's Phoebe to-day, young and shy as ever?"

"Phoebe is playing second fiddle," replied Captain Nat, mopping his brow as he seated himself in the proffered chair. "I've been up to Halfway to call on the little cousin that Garret has taken."

"Phoebe's nose is broken, eh?" queried the Postmaster, peering out over his pulpit and his glasses at the newcomer. "How'do Nat, glad to see you."

"I'd do as I'd be done by, if I had the chance," said the Captain. "I'd pass that pitcher of water over to you and ask you to have a drink."

"It's not water, it's lime-juice, straight from Montserrat, and it has a chunk of ice in it," said the Postmaster, pushing pitcher and glass toward the visitor, "but if you were a Wisdom clear through, Nat, name and all, I don't know as I'd pass it over so free, for we were planning on another sup around, ourselves, before you came in. You and I got

linked up with them pretty close far as the blood in our veins goes, but we haven't got the name itself, and consequently not the real 'thirst' the curse put upon them.

"It's a terrible punishment, all right, for those who have the real thing," put in Joel, "I've seen them drink a bucketful at a gulp, almost, and their desire not quenched, and to set a Wisdom man a-haying, without a well in easy run of him, is clear murder. Not many of them, round here at least, took to strong drink, but I've heard that was what carried off Amsey's brother Philip, and a good many others of them who went to foreign places, and into public life, and what you call society—got the taste of liquors, and always having the 'thirst,' went down and out in no time."

"I guess you're stepping on Captain Nat's toes," said Silas.

"O, never mind my toes," replied the Captain, "there are no corns on them now, I'm a teetotaler."

"It's a good old-fashioned word, that, Nat, sounds as if it meant business. You hear too much nowadays about people having 'temperance principles', and being 'moderate' and all that slush that's no real help to nobody. The right way to do is to come out flat-footed, and be the whole thing, stand right up against it, in your own house and out, and that's what will help the cause itself, and the weak fellows who haven't got strength of their own to stand out alone. Being a teetotaler, Nat, is a great sight better than buying out that tea meeting the way you did the first year you came home—haven't forgotten that racket, have you?"

"I don't have a chance to," said the Captain, after the general laugh had subsided. "There's always somebody reminding me of it, and so as I can't down it I have got myself into the way of thinking it was something I did for the cause, for they never made such easy money at a tea meeting before, or since, though I can't say apart from paying over the price that it is anything to be proud of. But speaking of the Wisdom thirst, I came across a queer sight to-day. I

was rounding the corner by the bridge, where you see the Skipper's place plain, and that girl of hers was sitting out on the rocks draining off mug after mug full of water from a pail where she had been to the well up the road, and if she didn't look like a Wisdom as she was doing it, then I never saw one."

"Why, she is none of us," said the Postmaster. "You got kind of addled, with being up at old Halfway where the first of us started out, eh! And they're so intermarried through the country that it's almost unsociable anyway not to look like one, round these parts. How did you like the little stranger up at Halfway?"

"Oh, she's a little queen, and one of the ilk all right, easy as an old shoe, and yet high-stepping and mighty like all the rest in the way she carries herself; said she was down here for the mail, so you saw her for yourselves. She could be a blessing to Garret and Hetty, if they would let her; young life in that old place, but Garret is Garret, same as ever, hasn't taken in any sail near as I could notice. Say, you should have seen him make me go round to the big front door, and sit in the best parlor—had Phoebe draw his chair in through that long hall, and made his bow as if he was the great-grandfather of us all—Gad, but I snickered inside, to see it. Garret doesn't love me overly much, seeing as I am the Island stock, and I expect it nettled him to have me call on the girl, so he thought he'd overpower me with splendour. But I've walked the deck of my own full rigged ship, and I hope I bore the honours as became me. It's a curious thing that most people can't see their own failings. Now Garret is that full of them that they fairly stand out like knobs all over him and yet he thinks he's all right and that it's the rest of us is out of step and line. I know if I had any, I'd see them myself."

A sally greeted his words, and Silas slammed his hands down so hard upon the table that the snug piled papers flew off in all directions. Captain Nat looked blandly round. "I

don't see who the laugh is on," said he. "I can't think of a single one I've got. I just go on my own way and don't bother other folks."

"Ask Hannah!" said Joel solemnly. "That's just the root of it all, it's our own individual ways that bother other people. You're pretty free from faults, yourself, but I reckon Phoebe and Hannah could find a few flaws when it came to every-day-living with you."

"So Phoebe was up at Halfway," interjected Silas slyly.

"She sure was! and you'd have crumpled up to see those two sitting out my call, blazing away at each other every chance they got. I hardly had the wind in my quarter at all till the child came in. She's the living image of Garret's sister Joan, the one that ran away and married Phil. I was only a boy when she was a young lady, but if you saw Joan Wisdom once you'd always remember her—my, but she was a red rose, beat the grandmother one that grows in all our gardens! When this little Joan came to the room, she kind of stood a minute on the doorsill, the hall was dark behind her, and she looked like a picture in a frame. I saw Garret clinch the arms of his chair and stare at her. Wonder how he came to have her here, when he wouldn't let his sister inside of Halfway after she married, and he and his father between them cheated her out of any share in the property."

"Turned Samaritan awful sudden like," said Silas, "charity begins at home, and there are people round here he needs to get a soft heart towards, who are as much his folks as she is."

"I pity the one who asks him the reason. We were up there to court last week and he was that stubborn and down-bearing he made every one of us mad as hornets. But he knows the law all right, and is just, too, in his decisions, and he knows a bit of most everything you can bring up. How he reached out and learned so many things I don't understand. He's not a doctor and yet he can say his bones with Dr. Zebra or any other of them. He's not a

minister but you'd find it hard to stick him for a verse in the Bible from cover to cover. And he's never been to sea and yet he knows a vessel from hull to mast top, same as a sailor. Dick Conners, he said in the cross-examining that he was a boat-builder. 'You only imagine you are,' said Garret. 'You build a strip of something you *call* boat and when a man orders one you cut off a piece of your strip and pucker it up at the ends and run it out, but it's clear luck if it floats. You're no more a boat-builder than I'm a Chief Justice, you're a *tinker,* do you understand!' And poor Dick he wilted right out of sight, for it was true as life; his boats aren't more than punts, the best of them, for either looks or speed. And you know how mumbly Tom Collins talks, and yet he's mighty important and sure of himself; so he was arguing away at the other end of the room, setting forth his case, and Garret waited till he got all through with his speech, and then said he, 'Gentlemen, I'm slightly deaf and I haven't heard a word of what Mr. Collins has told you but I'm prepared to say it was a lie from beginning to end,' and the laugh broke down Tom's whole argument that had seemed pretty good when he was talking it off. He's terrible overbearing as I said, and crusty and sharp, but bless me if in turning over some papers for him on his desk after the rest were gone, if I didn't come upon a sparrow, in a box of wool, and when I asked him about it he said the bird had got its leg broke and he was splinting it to see if 'twould heal."

"Plenty of good in him if he'd let it out," said Silas, "but he covers it up with his harsh words and deeds. I hear he foreclosed on Ann Dunlop's place last week. Now he has that whole meadow lot by just laying low and waiting for other people's misfortunes that mean fortune to him—like an old spider he is, has the countryside in his web, and sitting back himself up his string, watching them wriggle and get caught. It's sad to see a man of his means and knowledge ending his days the way he is."

"When you get right down at the root of it all it's not so bad," said the Postmaster; "you see when he came home and took the old place again, from what the rolls showed it used to cover, it had dwindled down to no more than twenty acres, wood and house lot and meadow, for his father had sold off here and there whenever he was in a tight place. Garret is nothing if he isn't proud of his name and his race, so having plenty of means to do it, he began to think it would be a good thing to get back all the land that was in the old title—and it's not any different now-days from scripture times, when a man covets a bit of vineyard he's not going to let a few scruples stand in his way. And hard times, and Death the reaper, and clear sheer luck have all been on his side in the transactions. I never saw the like of how things seem to play into his hands. His motive in the first place was all right, it's his methods in bringing it about that are wrong."

"But pride in your heart is a sinful thing," said Silas, "and always gets brought low in the end. It's better to have a good name among your neighbours and acquaintances, built upon integrity and love, than to build up Halfway. But all the rest he has done is play compared with the way he is using the lever on old Uncle Amsey. He's had the cross bridge taken down over the creek, and bought that strip of land this side that it rested on, and they've nothing but two foot planks across, farther up; can't get heavy stores over unless they go way up the road twelve miles at the head of the creek; all because Amsey won't sell back the pasture lands that the Island folks bought long ago from Garret's father. It is scandalous, and those two such cronies, when they were young fellows, always off together fishing and hunting, and into town to school. I hear Hetty isn't allowed to go to the Island. How did you find Hetty, Nat; quiet and cool as ever? She has a big load to carry, in Garret."

Captain Nat gave a chuckle. "She's been given grace and wit to bear it better than most of us could, and knows how to weather the gales all right. She took his black mare and

that top-buggy he bought last year but hasn't ever used, took it without asking, and got an early start away. I met her when I was going down to the mines, and could hardly believe my eyes. She told me how it came about, her own old horse and chaise out of commission, and kind of hinted she'd like me to break it to Garret while I was up, so the storm would be spent when she got back; very particular she was to say nothing against Garret, but I know them through and through, and thought I'd help her out, and I was expecting a cloud-burst all right when he was told. Gad, I got left, myself, for he took the news as cool as though it was only the wheelbarrow she had run out, though I gathered out of the tail of my eye from Phoebe and the little one, that there had already been a tempest over it. He's a queer makeup, nettles me like mad, and yet such a handsome old cuss, his face as if it was cut out of stone, and dresses so slick and well. Hetty was off on a two days' visit. I don't blame her for getting outside Halfway now and then."

"Hetty gets her visiting bump straight from her mother," said Joel, who held the history and genealogy of the whole township in the hollow of his hand. "Her mother never let anything interfere with her rounds. Once she started away for a day's visit, with all the children in the waggon, for over the marsh, and on the way across the old mare foaled on her hands, not a house nor a person in sight to help her out. But she saw it through all right, put the colt into the old chaise along with the youngsters, and not to be cheated out of her visit went right along, colt and all and spent the day as she had planned—enterprising woman she was, and I judge Hetty is a chip of the old block."

The official clock struck six. "Closing time," said the Postmaster, "and we'll have to be moving. I find it's all I can do to get home and through my supper and back here by half past seven, generally somebody sitting outside waiting for me when I do come. You'd better go along with me, Nat, for supper, you don't get down to the Corner often."

"That was just the port I was planning to make," said Captain Nat placidly, "but I won't deny that an invitation is better than asking yourself. My horse is getting shod, and won't be done till seven, so that makes me home about sundown."

"Why don't you sell out that Hill farm and move down here at the Corner?" asked Silas, walking along with the two till he should come to his turn of the road. "Must be lonesome up there now that you're getting on in years."

"Far as that goes, it's not near as lonesome as it was when I was a youngster, Silas, and I guess it's true, the old saying, that every Wisdom is a gang by himself, for I like my friends and I like my folks, and to go around occasionally to see them, but 'east or west, home is best,' and when you've had the sea and the stars and the sky all to yourself as long as I had, you couldn't be content living in amongst too many houses. I have a glass so powerful I can almost see what you're having for dinner down here at the Corner, and the wind blows free up there and racks the buildings so hard sometimes I think I'm off sailing again."

When Silas and Joel left them the two walked along in silence for a few moments, the sights and scents of the early June evening entering their souls with a spirit of rest. Strong of frame and force they were, and ready of speech, yet peculiarly in concord with the sweet tuneful things of Nature—the flash of a blue-bird's wing, a wind-flower's uplift face nodding in the wild wood, the young moon's wistful crescent grace, all the glory and the pageant that night and day spread for us, our "table in the wilderness" for susteance, that we may be fresh and free even in the presence of our enemies Trouble and Care.

Presently Alexander linked his arm in the Captain's. "I was going to ask you about this latest of Garret's, taking down the bridge to the Island, that Silas was telling us of. I can hardly believe it. In one way and another Garret has got enough to answer for without having to father anything

that doesn't belong to him. Is it true, do you know, that there are only footplanks over the creek, and the little bridge taken up?"

"True enough," said his companion. "I footed them only last week myself, and felt as if I was stepping a gangway. Of course they are old folks, Amsey and Orin, and don't often have a call to come over it, and when they want to drive out they can cross lots and join the main road the other side the Island, up by the twelve-mile, but that's a long way round, in case of sudden sickness or need. And there isn't anything they could do about it by law, I guess, for the old privilege was only an easement allowed by sufferance, between the two families first, and afterwards by the general public."

"But Amsey was down at the office last week, and he said nothing about it."

"There's Amsey for you!" said Captain Nat. "That's his one and only failing. He's too easy going, and always was, that's the streak in the Island branch, easy to live with at home all right, but not enough fight and force to battle their rights out in the world as you must, if you want to get on. I've got the same strain, but having to be master of my ship kind of killed it out. Garret had no right to row with Amsey as he did long ago, when they were young men, just because Phil and Joan ran off and got married, even if Amsey did kind of help them out driving them into town to the parson. Amsey should have stood right up in his boots to Garret, there and then, and had it out. Instead of that he took it cool, and thought it would blow over in time, but one thing after another added to the break, and it was never made up, and Garret got so sour with everything that he closed up Halfway and cleared out himself. I must say I'm glad Amsey's had spunk enough now not to sell out the pasture to him. I guess Orin has kind of stiffened him up since she came back home to live. I had a great afternoon with them. Amsey hasn't lost a bit of that whimsical kind of

humour he always had, and Orin is shrewd and nimble witted as ever, and we had a fine time. I wonder if they've heard about this child up at Garret's. She would be Phil's grandchild and as much their kin as she is Garret's."

"That is what I have been turning over in my own mind since she was down to the office this afternoon," said Alexander; "why would Garret want her, and where did he come across her? If he knew she was living, all this time he's been back, why hasn't he had her come before? It is only just lately, I believe, that he found out, for it was early spring the mail began to pass to and fro, from some school, I think it was, letters and what looked like documents. By the account we had of him and his doings to-day he hasn't begun to have a change of heart that you could notice, so why would he want back at Halfway the grandchild of the sister he wouldn't let inside its doors?"

"Queer how the threads of life get snarled, sometimes," said Captain Nat. "By all natural right she ought to be down at the Island instead, where they surely would give her a warmer welcome, being Phil's grandchild. Orin always set great store by Phil. I wonder how the Island property will go," said Captain Nat. "We've always understood it was entailed, and in that case this little Joan would be heir when Orin and Amsey are done with it."

"Guess we won't get far ahead with our speculating till we have some real fact to lay back on; and what Garret knows he'll keep to himself. Another thing I was going to speak of, Nat, was what you said about being a teetotaler.

"I thought I wouldn't ask you about it at the office, and tried to turn the others off the subject well as I could, but I was wondering how it came around, for you used to be quite free at drinking when you first came back from sea."

"I don't mind telling," said the Captain, "since it will be between you and me. It was that tea meeting racket did the business. I had only taken to my glass after I went from home, and not regular at all, just when I would be in

port and that like—and the foreign wines someway never made me silly. It was the stuff I got here at home that knocked me over, and that tea meeting day was the first time I was ever really under it. I had taken more than usual, and when the women came up and asked me for a subscription for the organ fund they were having the racket for, it riled me all of a sudden, and you know what I did—a rowdy deed it was, too. Soon as I had done it, though, I was sobered, and cleared out for home; but Hannah had got there before me, and told Mother all about it, and she called me into her chamber. She'd been bedridden, you know, for two years or more, and lay on that old canopied four poster, all wasted away with age and sickness, and she pulled my old tousled head down on the pillow beside her little white night-capped one, and snuggling her thin cheek against mine began to slip her finger up through these ridiculous old kinks of curls, just as she used to do, when I was a kid, and roll them round her fingers. 'Nattie,' said she, 'I'm ashamed of you, ashamed of the only son I've got; and ashamed myself to go before my Lord to render up my account of you.'

"And then sudden she turned and faced me, her old eyes shining like stars, and piercing as a sword prick, 'Nathaniel,' she said, stern, like a General in command, 'Nathaniel, promise me you will never touch it again in your life, never!' Promise her! What else *would* I do! Lying there with her eyes looking me through and through, so tiny I could have picked her up and put her in my pocket, and yet what had she gone through for me! Bone of her bone I was, flesh of her flesh, and down to Death's door to bring me into life. Why Heaven, or Hell, or whatever she had asked me I would have given up—and I promised. Next morning she was dead, slept quietly away through the night. What peace of mind would I ever have, if I had let her go that night back to her Lord, ashamed of the only son He gave her! Gad, Alec, the pluck of her, little bit of a thing

like that, tackling a fifty year old six footer, and holding him up—I'm proud of her! And though I haven't ever done anything to make her particularly proud of me, at least she shall not be ashamed again."

"I'm glad you told me," said the Postmaster. "It beats all, too, what a man would do for his Mother if she pinned him down to it. Girls get kind of weaned away from her authority—with having responsibilities of their own along the same line, but I don't believe a boy ever really grows up; far as his mother is concerned he's just about six years old, and the chivalry in us added to that, would give a mother almost all power on earth, if she'd use it to make us stand right up in our boots against evil and wrong doing. The trouble is that some of them do the very things themselves, that they try to keep their children from; and mothers, or fathers either for that matter, who aren't willing to deny themselves their own desires for the sake of the boys and girls the Lord has given them to train, deserve all the sorrow they get from it; and are not the real thing God intended them to be when He made them Parents. Louisa and I have often talked it over."

So, in silence or in speech the two walked on, communing with lip and heart out of their rich store of Life's experiences, till presently they reached the oak clump and turned down the road to Alexander's home, and supper.

"I've got it!" exclaimed Alexander that night as he lay upon his bed, bringing his hand with a whack upon his thigh that stirred his drowsy spouse.

"Got what?" asked Louisa, "that nightmare you were chasing?"

"You're mistaken," said Alexander, "I wasn't asleep, I was thinking about Garret. I'll tell you what I believe he's after in bringing that child back to Halfway—"

"Don't" replied the tranquil Louisa. "It's a bad habit to use your mind after you come to bed. Bed is for rest. And as for thinking about Garret, you need to be up and moving

around when you think about him," and turning over upon her pillow she was almost immediately in calm slumber.

Alexander smiled broadly in the dark at thought of her interpretation of his quarry—smiled again, a tender quizzical smile, at Louisa's placid untroubled nature, the absolute serenity and goodness that had been anchor all the years for his quick impulsive spirit. But still lying awake he said again, this time under his breath, "I believe I've got it. I'll watch and see how it works out."

CHAPTER VIII

THE MEADOW ISLAND

"UNCLE GARRET, my real name is Joan, like I say it myself, not 'Jo-ann,' the way you call it."

"O, is that so?" said the old man imperturbably. "It's news to me. There have been four of you, and the first one started out 'Jo-Ann,' named for her father who was Jo and her mother who was Ann. If the others as time went on chose to run them together, and give them that witchey sound, it's no concern of mine, since I know what are the proper facts. Pretty soon you'll be having visions, and 'seeing things,' like the French one the sound of whose name you would like to ape."

Joan had been on duty in the wing rooms for several days, sorting papers and pamphlets from out the deep closet where they lay in scattered bunches on floor and shelf, dusty, tattered and yellowed, most of them, stored in the deep old closet all the years that Halfway had been closed. Yesterday it had been Belcher's Almanacs to hunt from out the confusion, for Uncle Garret had secured the issues brought out in his absence from the country, and wanted the complete set, to date. So Joan had mounted to the high upper shelves, had looked through the piles upon the floor, and overturned boxes and baskets, all in vain attempt to round up the missing numbers, her fingers so dusty that it made her mouth dry to even feel them. If you are out all night, and *get* the cows, you do not mind the weariness of the long search, but to return without them keeps every detail of the fruitless effort fresh in your mind with a dead fatigue. So Joan had begun her task to-day with the clog of yesterday's

unavailing search, her eyes in pursuit not only of the fugitive almanacs, but also alert for the old blue covered magazines of Nova Scotia History in which Murdock's work was first published, and this double quest in the dim light was trying to even youthful nerve. Moreover, it seemed that every time she set her foot upon a lower shelf with one hand securely agrip of an upper, and its contents in range of her sight, that Uncle Garret would summon her to him for something else, always beginning his call with her name, long drawn and strident. It nettled her, the reiteration of it and the mangling of its soft sound, and her protest had sprung impulsive to her lips, born of her weariness and presumed upon by the intimacy of the long day together. In her histories she had read the story of the "maid," had always loved to hear her name, and in a dim unuttered sense had risen to its romance. So understanding the curt allusion to the visions, she stood by her guns.

"I can 'see things,' " said she, "things I am going to have some day. I see them just as plain."

"O! do you!"

"I haven't ever had any really good times, to be remembering about, and so I have to make up things that might come, to keep me going."

"To keep you going—umph!" said Uncle Garret, with a keen look at the eager little face, and the blue Wisdom eyes that were not looking into his, but away somewhere, bent upon that outward quest.

"Well," said he, continuing somewhat less gruffly, "you have reached a place where you'll have some pleasant things without 'imagining' them, if you behave as you ought, now that you are my adopted daughter."

Joan turned quickly toward him. "Adopted daughter! Why, I never thought I was that."

"You signed the papers that made you one, at the School."

"But I didn't know it," said she; "I thought it was something about leaving the School."

"Well, you have learned a lesson; never put your name to a document without knowing what you are up against and reading it clear through, yourself. There are more fools, mostly women folk, too, who sign themselves into all kinds of trouble—asking no explanation, but putting down the name the laws of the land gave them to stand by, signing away property, and comfort, and often life itself in the end. The deed is done now in this matter of yours, but remember my counsel, for another time. I thought I could take better care of you if you were bound to stay. It was not because I wanted to leave you my property, as I've told you before, for that all goes to found a Men's Home, where old derelicts can be taken care of in peace and plenty without some woman hectoring about them with advice and red flannel and boneset tea.—You understand? Your Aunt Hetty does. I'll leave her enough for bed and board and wardrobe, as I give it now, but no more. She'll have to skirmish around herself if she wants any extra fixings. If you are dutiful, and please me, I'll do the same by you, but this house and the property I am acquiring will be a Home where old men can board with self-respect, free from trundling and badgering of women folk. Do you understand, Jo-ann?"

Joan this time felt sure she did, for it was without doubt plain speech. And yet it did not turn her against the old Uncle, but started a new feeling within her heart, a wish that she might find out some way to be more to him than mere ministration of hand and foot, to lead him if possible into more pleasant paths, a vague flitting of the Ideal that he whom they had called Silas had set before her that day at the Post Office. But the Ideal fled outright at his next words, grim and scornful. "Your Aunt Hetty tells me that you think you have been here before. Is that one of the things you 'imagine'?"

Joan's eyes quickly met his own, the hurt yet half-defiant look in their glance. "I couldn't have only imagined it, for the Postmaster told me about it himself, first; and then I

knew it was so because it fitted in with what had seemed so queer—as if I was coming back to things that I had seen before."

"Sit down," said he, "and tell me what you think you really know about it all. We will leave the rest of the pamphlets for to-morrow. Why did you not come direct to me with your story? It does not please me for you to go gathering news around the countryside. Another thing, while we are on such topics, I want you to know that it is not necessary to tell that you are adopted, not even to your Aunt Hetty, at present; and keep your knowledge also from Alexander and the Mailman and the rest of the people with whom you seem to be on such very good terms for so short an acquaintance." He saw the half start she made at the sting of his words.

"Sit down again," said he in more kindly tone. "The fault may be mine that I have not given you opportunity to talk with me. Now is one. Tell me all the things you 'remember,' Jo-ann."

She hesitated for a moment, then came the thought that if she did now as he bade her, she might, while the waters were stirred, step in and ask about the place they called the Island, and the people there whom Captain Nat had said were as much her relations as was Uncle Garret, and so she began her story.

Here and there, as she told one and another of the memories that had been so intangible and dreamlike but had turned into real experiences, he interjected his comment or question, pulling her up sharp, or dismissing some irrelevant point, listening quietly at other times with unfeigned interest, till finally the recital was at an end, and the narrative of Joan's poor little drear bare life, all that she could remember of it, was before him, to date. She had told it well, he noted that, not once tripping at his interruptions. All the facts that belonged to one occurrence she had grouped, so that it was distinct of itself, and the whole a series of these

pictures, each in its setting of place and peoples. It pleased the old man, crabbed and harsh as he was. He had observed the disposition to keep order with her hands, the papers and books in even stacks, her quick deft motions, and now this recital showed him also an ordered mind.

"Good stuff!" said he to himself, "good stuff," and his gruff expression somewhat uplifted, so that Joan dared make the plunge about the Island kin; and it was characteristic of another trait within her that she took a straight dive and did no splashing about.

"Who lives at the place Captain Nat called the Island?" she asked.

"The people who own it.—" Uncle Garret had not been taken off his guard.

"What is it like, the Island?"

It pleased him to be facetious while he turned over in his mind what should be his final determination concerning the intercourse between Joan and the other branch of the family.

"An island," said he, "in the school-books that I learned from, was defined as a piece of land all surrounded by water —I presume the same meaning holds to-day as to islands in general, but this particular one is only a piece of land higher than its surrounding meadow; possibly at some time in its history the water flowed over the meadow and the name has been thus handed down. After my grandfather built Halfway a step-brother of his came to the country also, and settled on this place we know as the Island. We call that family the 'halves,' and it is some of them who now live there."

It was his judicial air, the tone and speech in which he conducted his tribunals, and his listener felt the awe of it, but being profoundly curious about those other kindred, was not yet silenced.

"Are they old people?" she asked.

"Presumably so; what you yourself would call old. They

are your grandfather's sister, and brother, and would be your great-aunt and uncle."

"O, would they be real ones, and can I go and see them soon? I thought you said I hadn't any others beside you——"

"What I did say, was that there were 'none to speak of,' and I meant what I said. After this, Jo-ann, you will not question any remark of mine. As for visiting the Island and making the acquaintance of the Island family, you will not do either, with my consent."

She looked at him with surprise. "Wouldn't they be expecting to know me?"

Uncle Garret had by now determined upon his course.

"The two households," said he, "have not been on friendly terms for many years, for a good reason, which it is not necessary to explain at present. Halfway has room enough for you to wander in, and I have occupation for you, and in case you do not properly understand I will tell you plainly that I do not wish you to go to the Island, nor to open up friendship with those who live there, nor to question others about them. It is enough for you to hear my instructions and to follow them out. You may go now," and he turned to his desk, his voice and manner so downbearing and final that Joan felt as if a weight had descended upon her and shackles about her feet. How could she ever be free enough to help him, or to talk with him, when he repulsed her with such curt dismissal at every approach; and the wistful disappointment was in the backward glance she gave him as she left the room. He caught the expression and it bothered him, as a cowed one would have not, but with no regret for his stern decree, nor change of mood. For presently coming in his writing to a bit of information needed from a back number of the 'Star,' and that especial paper eluding the search within his reach, he called her back to hunt it up, losing his temper outright when she could not find it; summoning Aunt Hetty also to the quest, and even having Pelig who sometimes had the reading of it, brought in to answer a

charge of appropriation or destruction thereof—when all three failed in their efforts, bursting forth in such petulant and stormy abuse that Joan was fairly frightened and beat a hasty retreat at his angry command, with tears upon her cheeks.

"Don't mind him," proffered Pelig good naturedly, coming out a few minutes afterwards, leaving Aunt Hetty by virtue and privilege of lawful wife to bear the tail of the storm.

"He has the best place in the county, and the most money, and knows more than anybody around, and yet he's letting his bile pizen his whole life, and I'd rather have Hardscrabble and nothing, than be Garret Wisdom the way he behaves himself."

"That's a funny name, 'Hardscrabble.' Is it a place?" Joan was evidently diverted, and that was just what Pelig had intended.

"You ought to see it," said he, "granite boulders, scrub pine and blueberry bushes, and once in a while a pocketful of earth enough for a starvation farm. But it's not up to me to run it down, seeing as I was born there—and I'd sooner stay there too, with the bad luck of the Hardscrabble Wisdoms, than have Halfway and the Squire's temper. I guess I best not talk to you any more now, for he might come down on you for it. If you set the pail by the garden gate I'll fetch the water up for you to-night," and with a pull at his ruddy shock, in salute, he left her.

But when Aunt Hetty had emerged from out the storm centre, and she and Joan had made ready the evening meal in the big old dining-room, he came in and joined them, taking his place at the cover that was always laid for him but which he had never sat up to since Joan's arrival. And she was astonished to hear the ease of his speech, here and there wrongly pronounced words, but flowing and balanced as if from a book. Her eyes were yet red with traces of her tears, and little Aunt Hetty had evidently met more than the usual buffetting, so Pelig's presence and conversation lifted and

lightened them both. He had been up the chain of lakes, in big timber tracts, and told them of the moose that came down at dawn to the water's rim to drink, the silver-backed loons upon the bosom of the lake, the soft plumed owls in noiseless flight, the Indian encampment at the Falls. He told it vividly, with the same quality Joan herself had shown that afternoon to Uncle Garret, so that they saw it almost plain as if with eye and sense; saw also the other little homely pictures of the farm that he set before them, the nests of eggs he had found in the hedge row that morning, the flock of little goslings upon the creek, and a bank of strawberries nearly ripe for eating.

By and by when Joan went in for the supper-tray she had taken to Uncle Garret before they themselves sat down, she suddenly remembered having seen a folded "Star" in one of the drawers of his desk when she had been sent there for a document, and receiving permission to get it, found it was indeed the missing paper. But though it had been put there by his own hand, she got no commendation for revealing its hiding place, only a stern reproof instead, that she had not before remembered; and orders to be left by himself for the evening. So when the gay flowered china had been washed and set back upon its shelf, she sought out Aunt Hetty, already established in her rocker by the western window, patchwork basket upon her knee, looking as untroubled and serene of face as if only fine weather and fair winds attended her course throughout. Joan herself still smarted under the harsh fault-finding words, resenting the unjust blame put upon them all, almost a terror within her at his anger and scorn, and a wonder that anybody could bear it unmoved!

"Aren't you ever afraid of Uncle Garret when he is like that?" she asked.

Aunt Hetty considered, and gave Joan a look-over. This was the first occasion that the two of them together had been under storm and ban, but there would be many another, and

it was not too soon perhaps to give her a hint as to how she might weather the gales with least effect upon herself.

"I am and I'm not," said she. "I make myself think I'm not, because I can get along better with it that way. I knew what to expect, when I married him, for his other wife was my own sister, and I often visited them in the West. He led her a hard life because she would answer him back and try to show him the error of his ways, and it was poor policy, for instead of repenting of them he always blamed her for objecting to what he had said or done, and so the tables were turned and she was the one who had to sue for peace, woman's ways, with an extra good dinner or some such thing; and he got complete upper hand and she couldn't call her soul her own. By keeping quiet, and not talking back, I get what I want, mostly, and Providence has favoured me in laying him up with rheumatism, so he can't get around the house much."

"But he scolds so even when you haven't done a thing!" protested Joan, still unconvinced of the secret of Aunt Hetty's serenity, "and he talks so hard and loud, sometimes, and loses his temper so quick."

"They all do, all men, more or less," rejoined Aunt Hetty, "and I who have had three husbands, ought to know. A parson is as bad as a peddler, in proportion to the light that is given him. My second was a licensed preacher, and had bad moods as the first, but he likened them to King Saul's, and got out of it in that Scripture fashion, himself, but it didn't help me out any. You must learn not to mind your Uncle's ways, if you are to live here with him."

"And don't you really care, yourself? Wouldn't you like it if he was pleasant all the time? You look so pretty, Aunt Hetty, and you dress so much nicer than I ever saw anybody else dress—I don't see how he dares to talk to you so."

A flush came into the little old face, and the shrewd grey eyes softened with a longing light for an instant, her hands

dropping idle upon the patchwork pieces within the basket's depths.

"We'll not talk any more about it now," said she presently. "Your Uncle is what circumtsances have made him, and we get on very well, considering. When I married the first one I did not know enough to keep a still tongue—it took two of them to teach me that, and I am trying it out now, and if a woman can't learn to manage a husband after being favoured with three, then she is poor stuff herself. Most all the quarrels in the world could have been stopped if only somebody in the beginning had known enough not to answer back—and half of all a man's temper is only bluster, anyway, to show he is master—it's their make up. You had better get the fresh water from the spring, now, and then it will be time for young folks like you to be abed. I want to get my Philadelphia-Pavement pieced up, and it rattles me to talk and match. I've got this last block all wrong, and will have to take it apart. Good-night," and Joan was dismissed.

But when she had got through her usual round of duties in the wing rooms, and had received a cold "good-night, Jo-ann," from the master within them, she came back to where Aunt Hetty was sitting. The long June day was at an end but the glow of the sun's going down was still upon the earth, and it seemed dreadful to have to go upstairs alone, where it was so still and dusky, while here in this western windowed room was light and company.

"I wish I could stay down with you awhile," she said, "I won't bother you when you're matching, and when you can't see to sew couldn't we go all through the house,—you said you would show it to me, and I'd like to go in every bit of it. It's so nice and big, I just love it, don't you?"

The piecer of patchwork was not anxious for company. The blocks of one row were before her upon the floor, and she was laying forth another beyond it, an imaginary row, to get the sequence for the corner square, with outstretched

hand patting the air above each block and saying over its colour, "pink, blue, grey—pink, blue, brown—pink, blue," the interruption bothered her, and Joan's mere plea for company would have been denied, but the "loving" Halfway clinched the matter, for Aunt Hetty too loved the big old place and was proud to be its mistress.

"I suppose you may stay," she yielded, "but Halfway is not properly seen at night. We have poor lights here in the country, and we'll wait for daylight to go through it. It was wasteful pride to build it so big, but I own it pleases me, and I always thought when I was a girl that I'd like to live here; that was one reason why I was willing to marry your Uncle. I had to live in small houses with both other husbands, and we'll all be in a narrow one soon enough with no room to turn, so I'm glad to have a place where I can spread my things about, upstairs and down, and off in rooms you don't open often; it satisfies me, and makes up, some, for other things. We had no spare chamber in my last home, and being a licensed preacher the delegates always came to us, and I was all the time moving out and fixing up my own room for them, so now I like to know there are those four big ones upstairs ready any minute for anybody who comes, and I often go and peep into them, white and clean and smelling nice with the sweet-clover bags and lavender scenting them. Hannah makes me the sweet-clover cushions. She is Captain Nat's sister, and they have a double row of it all down to the pasture, in blossom time as high up as your neck, and so sweet it nearly strangles you to walk through. Hannah says it's the only time she is ever "in clover," and you'll find her there early and late gathering the flowers while the dew is on them. She pretends she only keeps it growing for the bags she makes for every one of us at Michaelmas time, but down underneath Hannah is sentimental as anybody, covering it over atop with hard ways like most of the other Wisdoms do."

She looked up musingly from her sewing. "I'm due to

go up there for a visit soon, and maybe I'll take you with me. It's a big house, too, and plenty of places in it to amuse you. We've none of those bungalow buildings around here—every room on the ground floor and all jumbled together, young folks and old, in 'living-rooms' they call them, and 'dens'—no privacy. You can't tell me that a girl will grow up as nice and dainty in a 'living-room' and a 'den,' as she would with a more formal parlour to sit in for every day, a drawing-room for Sundays and high company, a big chest with locker in it for her treasures, and a chamber all her own. No 'dens' for me!"

A smile curled Joan's lips, and deepened into the dimples in her cheeks that were going to be the undoing of some man some day; sweet, shy dimples that like the smile that brought them out had been given few chances for show.

"A 'den' would be a good name for Uncle Garret's room, wouldn't it?" said she.

Aunt Hetty stiffened a bit. She had been feeling that she may have talked too freely about her husband, and was not to be caught a second time even with the dimples that spread so sweet for her entangling, but she sensed the aptness of the allusion and relaxed a bit.

"I have often thought I would like to have a house-warming, everybody all at once instead of scattered along as they usually come—a real supper-party, all the nearest relations—and get squared off with them at one sitting; then I'd feel free to start out again on my round without asking back so often. Maybe we could manage it bye and bye. You would be quite a help to me."

"O, my, I wish you would," urged Joan eagerly. "Would there be the Postmaster, and Captain Nat and the one you call Hannah? I was never at a party in all my life. Phoebe would come and help——"

"Phoebe wouldn't come for help. For a time like that she'd come for company or not come at all. She hasn't more than a drop of the blood in her veins, as she often tells us

when she's roused against any of them, but she sets great store by it for weddings and funerals, where they all meet together. We couldn't get through the preparations alone, for there would be sixteen or twenty all told, and I would do it in keeping with Halfway if I did it at all——"

Joan could almost see them, twenty people, all her own relations, sitting in the grand drawing-room, and at the big table. "O, don't give it up, Aunt Hetty," she pleaded, "please don't. I'll work so hard to help, and O, I know somebody else, the Mailman said you called her the Skipper, the one who lives in that funny little house on the rocks, wouldn't she come? She isn't any kin, is she?"

Aunt Hetty thought a bit—"I dare say she might, and that girl she took is about your size, and could do some things. I need some extra washing done now, blankets and quilts. Your Uncle Garret hates her,—some old quarrel about her land, but she likely needs money and would be glad to come, and we could keep her out of the way so she wouldn't bother him. I guess since you know where she lives I'll have you go down one day this week and see when she'll be free to come. I've never asked her before, but we'll see how it works out this time and what kind of help she would likely be for the party. And if you like the look of the girl you can tell her to come too. I hear she is a likely little thing and very nice in her ways, and it would be a bit of young company for you. Lisbeth is her name."

"Would it be soon, the party?"

"O no, I have three more places yet where they owe me a visit. And I want my Philadelphia-Pavement quite done, and the Rising-Sun set up. They are all wild to have a Rising-Sun but I am the only one who has the pattern, and I'd like to have it all cut out and well started when they come—It's my twenty-seventh figure, and I don't know whether I'll ever want to make another, for they say this is terribly trying to your patience and nerves."

It almost looked like a delectable probability that the

party would come off, and then suddenly came a chilling thought to Joan. "Will Uncle Garret want it?" she asked, with an almost outright knowledge in her heart that he would not, and fearful that even the question might by bringing it to light cause a throw-up of it all. But the little woman who had snared three husbands and pieced twenty-seven patterns of patchwork had not reckoned without her host on this occasion.

"If we have it, we will not tell him about it beforehand," said she placidly, folding away the pink and blue blocks atop the sombre browns and greys within the basket.

"But what would he say!" gasped Joan, an all too vivid recollection ringing in her ears of the recent stormy period, and also the previous one which had descended upon them after Aunt Hetty's bold dash in the top-buggy.

"I've thought it all out, often, and the only way we could possibly have it would be to invite them and let them come, and then take what happens. I have never been forbidden to have a company, and so am not disobeying orders. If worst comes to worst, it will be only his own folks he'll show off to, they are no real relation of mine; nor is he for that matter. And I surely ought to be able to have a party in my own house," said Aunt Hetty with a finality of tone that left no further doubt as to her intent. She did not make her utterances in continuous stretch, they were detached, and broken, with pauses between, where a square needed trimming, a needle threaded, a proper word chosen; an even and tuneless intonation about it all that gave no colour to the speech. But courageous she doubtless was, in spite of the abstracted tones, and the rebel Wisdom spirit slumbering in her young listener's heart rose to the daring of it. "But what *would* he say, and what *would* he do!" she thought.

Aunt Hetty gave her no time for further reflection. The interview plainly was at an end, for the work-basket was set away, the books and papers snugged in even piles, and the lamps lighted for the night's duties. They made no evenings

after dark at Halfway, those long summer twilights. So with a second good-night Joan slipped away upstairs, tiptoeing down again carefully, to get the big mug of water she had set upon the step when filling Uncle Garret's jug afresh, and drinking it all up before she had even reached the top landing.

"I don't think I'll ever, ever get enough!" she said to herself, "and even when I can't hold any more, I want it just the same—I wonder if I caught it from Uncle Garret!"

And with thought of him came memory of his harsh mood of the afternoon, of his cold and curt good-night, his angry speech to the little old Aunt. But when she was upon her bed, and the day's doings and those things she would like to do, sometime, spread out before her "seeing" eyes, the plans for the party stretched out plainest and most desirable. And the daring of the way Aunt Hetty was to bring it to pass made Joan think of her other venture, the horse and buggy taken without consent, almost under Uncle Garret's nose, and the terrible tempest that had descended upon them all in consequence. He was awful, awful that day! Still wasn't it splendid that he didn't scold about her to Captain Nat!—and it someway warmed her heart a little toward him, remembering it—*"Hetty is a fine hand with horses"*—so proud and cool! It made her laugh now to even remember it. And all in the dim starlit room the dimples deepened again in her cheeks, and for the first time since she came to Halfway Joan fell asleep with a smile upon her face.

CHAPTER IX

SKIPPER JANE'S DAUGHTER

LISBBETH belonged to the Skipper only as love maketh a bond. She had been deposited at the cabin door, a scantily clothed little waif with wan freckled face and black shadowy eyes, on her way from the poor-farm to a family in the neighbouring district. The meat-cart which was her conveyance had broken down just in front of the yard, the little passenger with a scattered array of beef and bacon and legs of lamb thrown to the ground. The fall hurting afresh an already crippled knee, she was brought to the cabin, the driver agreeing to call for her when he could get his damaged cart repaired and again make his weekly round.

'Tis an ill wind that blows nobody any good, and what lost the butcher-man his market day gained Lisbeth a home, for when the week had passed and the man appeared for his charge the little girl had someway crept into the strange old woman's affections and she refused to let her go, insisting that she would herself keep her without aid from county or district. The home she had to proffer was small and plain, but seemed a very Paradise to the child whose days ever since she could remember had been spent in the rickety Poor-House on the hill or with some family who was willing to board her out for the sake of the small pittance the county allowed, and the many odd chores her little six-year-old hands and feet were made to perform.

"They call me Bet, or Lib," she replied when the woman first asked her name. But at night when she was being put to bed she said, "My really name is Lisbeth, for the Doctor up at the Farm told me so and he knows about everybody

there. I've never been called it yet, because they always said it took too long to say. I think it's a beautiful name, and if you'll only just call me by it one whole day I'll let you go back to 'Bet' again."

But the woman who had neither child nor any one beside left with right to love, had hugged the little wistful scrawny face close to her own for answer, and never once in all the years since had been too busy to salute her with aught but the good full name; nor ever once in the same years regretted her adoption, nor begrudged even if she sometimes was forced to count the extra bites it took to keep her.

The charity from poor to poor goes sweetly up on high, and the Skipper's added blessings had been steadier work than she had ever before got, and a happier home than she had known for many a year.

"What will I call you?" the child had asked next morning as the woman was starting out for a day's work, after minute directions as to what Lisbeth should or should not do while alone.

"Whatever you like. They call me the Skipper around here, or Jane, either one will do."

The black shadowy eyes met the older ones. "Haven't you got any real and truly name too, that you like best?"

Something awakened in the heart of the Skipper, and the emotion of it swept up over the hard old face. "I have," said she, "and it's a prettier one than yours. It is Miriam, but like yours it took too long to say. It was my mother's name."

The child slipped a hand with simple winning gesture into the Skipper's own. "I have to like mine the best, too," she said, "because you always have to like your own things the nicest or else you break the laws of stone."

"Who told you that?"

"Granny Squires up at the work-house. She has the laws of stone hanging up on her wall; and she had an old

torn quilt and I had a pretty flower one that a girl gave me, and Granny Squires said she had to like hers best even if it was ragged, or else she'd be wanting mine, and break a law. She taught me the easy ones, about killing and stealing, and she knows them all and keeps every one, even the awful long ones, so she'll go to Heaven, she says."

The woman smiled grimly. "Long or short, 'Thou shalt not' is hard to keep, for most of us," said she. "But we'll leave that alone now, and you obey the ones I've told to-day; no matches, door locked, and no meddling in drawers or boxes. You'll be a lot of company to come home to, I see, and I'm glad you're here, Lisbeth."

"And can I call you the Miriam name?" asked the child. "I think it's the next nicest to mine."

"If you like," said the woman, "but only by ourselves. Jane will do when other folks are around," and patting the freckled little face in good-bye, she was off.

The years had gone on apace, and Lisbeth was now a girl of seventeen. Her thin cheeks had filled out, the freckles had disappeared, in their stead a lovely wild-rose colour that gave the wan face a strange charm, creeping clear up to the black eyes that still held their shadows. The lame knee had kept her from regular attendance at school, but in the few weeks possible each term, she was able to absorb the knowledge of the books with a wonderful ease, going over each lesson to the Skipper at the day's close, and talking of it to her with an interest that spread it plain as a picture before the older mind.

Always a strange and silent woman even when first living in the settlement during her husband's life time, the Skipper had by now grown sharp and morose, the necessity that compelled her to work for others hardening her heart toward everything but Lisbeth; and holding no intercourse with people beyond the requirements of her labour. So Lisbeth was seldom away from the cabin except when at school, and until the past two years had experienced no de-

sire to venture beyond the simple home, well content with the shelter it afforded her and the woman's kind if stolid care.

But dawning girlhood had stirred new impulses, unrest, dreams, and vague longings to be up and doing out in what was the world, unexpressed but visible to the woman who watched with growing wonder and often puzzled mien to see the child merge into maidenhood, the roses bud and bloom upon her white face, the spare throat fill to roundness, and a lissome grace of movement that changed her whole bearing.

It was in these days that the Skipper began to be concerned about the lameness that sometimes kept the girl indoors for weeks at a time, then would seemingly disappear, to return again sudden and sharp at some extra exertion. And between them it was decided that they would take the washings from the mine officials' homes down the river, to earn money for a trip to town to consult a doctor, Lisbeth washing at home while Jane was absent, the two thus getting double wage.

Scanty room there was for laundry work inside the small cabin, so the tubs and their paraphernalia were kept under the little bridge that spanned the river just below the house. Swift the water flowed just there over its pebbly bottom, clear as glass, and here each day Lisbeth washed. Drivers to the mill in the early morning as they crossed the river could hear the plash splash of suds and dub-a-dub-dub of board, beneath the bridge, or perhaps see the white garments fastened by stones spreading out upon the swift current's breast in the full copious rinsing of the running stream, or later in the forenoon the pieces hanging upon the lines that surrounded the little house, fluttering and flapping like spanking sails in a favouring breeze, as though the cabin was a-keel and ready with canvas ahoist for far away.

Joan, coming to the little house at Aunt Hetty's behest to engage Jane for the washing of the Halfway blankets,

got no answer to her summoning knock. Through the half open door, she could plainly see inside. A strange looking interior it was, steps descending to it as if to a real cabin aboard ship, tables, chairs and beds attached to or sunk into floor and wall, two big sailor's chests underneath the small round windows that looked like port-holes, and everything painted as blue as the ocean's rolling deep; the shining black cookstove making the only contrast.

She would have loved to enter to see it throughout, but would not set an obtruding foot therein unbidden, even if only a washerwoman's abode, so turned reluctantly away and was crossing the bridge to return home by the shorter route, when she too heard the plash of suds, and peering down over the railing saw Lisbeth at her task. A small fire burned upon the bank, over it hung the big pot of steaming water, and down almost under the bridge stood Lisbeth, barefooted, ankle deep in the limpid stream, holding out the cases to catch its running flow, wringing them with quick deft hands and throwing lightly and surely to the waiting basket higher up. One of the cases she swung round and round with its open end to the breeze, and gathering it quick together held aloft a long white balloon, slapping its taut fulness with the glee of a child upon her face, then plunging it in the stream again till it collapsed.

Joan gazed down fascinated. It was the first young girl she had seen in all the weeks she had been here. Great-aunts and great-uncles, and distant cousins—all old and wrinkled and life far behind them, but here was a real girl, like herself, even if a washerwoman. And she smiled, the little crooked Wisdom smile at first, that begrudges letting people know you are really and truly happy—and then the smile blossomed out into the flower bloom that was just joyous earth, and life ahead instead of far behind.

Then something else happened, that baffling sense of an occurrence which she could not recall, the tantalising dream fancy of having been there before with this girl with the

black shadowy eyes. Only for the one brief moment was it beclouded, and then the light broke through, and she *knew,* she *knew,* now, what the Postmaster meant about the lost shoes and stockings story!

"O, Lisbeth!" she cried, and jumping outright the wide rail landed on the shore beside the other girl. "Lisbeth, *do* you remember me? the day we washed dolls' clothes here and went wading way down to the mill and I lost my shoes, —I was staying at some house near, *don't* you remember?" as no answering glow of recollection showed upon the girl's face.

"You came with a woman, and you and I played all day, —it's just as plain to me now, but I couldn't think it out before—and we had to shell dry beans, a whole firkin full, before she would let us play—and we cut our hands on the pods." There suddenly the flash had been communicated to the other, illuminating the face that was small and oval as Joan's own but brilliant with colour where Joan's was creamy and dark.

"Now I do," she said shyly, reaching over a hand crinkly from river water. "It was Mrs. Debbie's. She always had me go over and shell her beans after that, till she died. Her house was up there on the hill and was burned down two or three years ago. I didn't know it was you when I heard a girl had come to Halfway, and I didn't think I'd be knowing you ever—O!" And they both together cried out in consternation as the towels that Lisbeth had been wringing floated off out of hand's reach down the swift current. Joan was nearest, and snatching what seemed a stick from the bank above, she followed fast down the river-side in pursuit, soon returning with the runaway pieces, but with the stick snapped in two, and the smile gone from her lips.

"I'm so sorry," she cried, "I didn't know it was a crutch, and now I've broken it, and what will you do? Aunt Hetty said you were lame sometimes, but I forgot. I needn't have broken it. I can't help doing things so *hard;* it's something

in me lately that makes me want to pound and hit everything, and reach up, and reach down, and lift heavy things. Could I get you anything else from the house to walk with? O, I *wish* I hadn't done it."

"It's nothing to mind about," said the girl. "I can get on without it, but I always bring it if I feel any twinges in my knee, and this morning I felt them some, that's all."

"What makes you stand in the water? Uncle Garret has rheumatism and he is so careful about his legs. I wouldn't think it was good to be in the water if you have a lame knee."

"We don't worry much about it," replied Lisbeth with that disregard for ailments that the very poor so often evince. "Sometime we are going to see if the doctor can cure it. That's what I do the washing for, and I hurry fast as I can every day so I'll be through when Jane comes, for lately she says she can't bear to see me doing it. But I can stop awhile now before I have to hang them out," and she sat down beside Joan upon the flat shelving rocks that pushed up from the river's bed, like reefs, stretching across clear through the cabin's yard.

"It's funny about us being here once before," said Joan. "Didn't you ever think of it when you were washing?"

"No, I guess I forgot it all, but it was what you said about shelling the beans made me remember, for I had to do all she had, every year after that. Jane never took me many places where she worked, but I always went there with her, and I could do lots of things for Mrs. Betty. She wasn't very kind to some children, Jane said, but she was always good to me."

"Is Jane your aunt? Everybody around here is an aunt or an uncle or a cousin."

"There's nobody an aunt or an uncle to me, but Jane is as good as if she was really one, for I came from the Poorhouse to her, and she's kept me ever since. She hasn't any folks herself, and I haven't either."

"Well, we'll be folks, you and I, now," said Joan. "I haven't seen a girl my own age since I came, and I've been to meeting twice, and to the Post Office and store. Every body must be old. I wonder why."

"The place is drying up, Jane says," explained Lisbeth, hesitatingly, like one who seldom had an audience for spoken thought. "She says it will be all shut up and gone to pasture land in twenty years, because there aren't any new ones coming in, and the mines down the river draw all the people. It's what you call too slow. There hasn't been a circus for years and years, and no wonder the young folks left, Jane says. There used to be gipsies, and I've seen the place where they used to camp, but she wouldn't let me go down the road where they said there was an old gipsy man, one year. Somebody told me he was there again, now, and I'd love to see a real gipsy—— Would you dare go?" she asked turning full face upon her visitor.

It was a call to the blood of youth. Joan heard it. "Wouldn't I!" said she, in a tone that left no doubt whatever as to her desire. "But how could you go if you are lame?"

"I'll choose a time in between when it's not so bad, and if you want to do a thing much as I do that, why, you don't mind if it does hurt some. It's a long road, but it's a beautiful one, and so still, no houses on it I guess, and a lovely high hill all the way, on one side."

Joan interrupted her—— "O, I know where it is, I do believe. Is it that narrow dear one that turns off by the Forks, that you only see a little bit of and then it's lost?"

But Lisbeth shook her head. "I don't know myself how it looks from the post-road, for we just turned in on it a little way when we were blueberrying, and a woman told me if you followed it up, you'd come to where the gypsies used to be; Jane never lets me away much and I don't know how the roads start or end. We never go to meeting, and we never have any mail so I don't go to the office; and I'm done

school now so I don't see many people. Jane says if a girl is out of sight she's likely to be out of mischief."

"I don't see any mischief you could get into. Everybody is old and good around here, and you and I could be together a lot now."

"Up at Halfway they'll not likely let you be with me much, when they know; we're just poor, Jane and I, and that's such a big house. I saw it once when we were riding down to the mines, last month, and it was the queerest feeling but my feet almost pulled me out of the waggon to go up that lovely long lane and see inside the house, and when I told Jane she cried, the first time I ever saw her cry. I suppose she felt bad because we were poor and Halfway was so rich. She hates to be poor, but I don't mind so much, because there seems to be two of me, and one likes what I have, all right, and the other one of me makes believe I've got everything fine and rich; so when I have to do the washing or we don't have enough money to buy the kind of hat and dress we'd like, why I keep thinking of fine things I've read about and heard about. When you called to me down from the bridge I was believing I was up at your big house, and had on a long train dress, a silk one like they say Mrs. Wisdom always wears even when she is round her work. I know we won't be allowed together much, but I'm awful glad you came to see me once."

Joan moved up a bit closer to the other girl. "Why, I'm not rich," she said. "I was poor just like you, and had to work at places taking care of babies, till I was sent by somebody to a School. But that School was worse than the other places were, for we had to work so hard, and some of the girls were half foolish, and it was dreadful, except that I could learn some lessons there, and I do love books and to know things. So I'm no different from you, you see, really. I used to feel just like you did too about the hard things, that they couldn't last always. I have never had a silk dress in my life, either, and I do love to see Aunt Hetty

always wearing one. She never gets a speck on her no matter what she's doing, and she makes me do things without an apron on, so I'll learn to work carefully. I'm sure she won't keep me from coming here, for she sent me down herself, to see if Jane would go up to Halfway a day, and to let you come too. We've had such a good time talking that I almost forgot all about it!"

Lisbeth looked rueful! "Jane never takes me nowadays."

"O, but if you told her you wanted to! You don't mean you wouldn't come!"

"I do whatever she tells me, and so it wouldn't be mine to say."

"You're right, it's not," said a voice behind them, and the girls started to their feet, Lisbeth slipping a hand into the outstretched one of the woman's who had spoker, and Joan with almost a frightened glance as she met the gaze of the piercing black eyes that looked down upon her. In utter silence for several moments the woman stood, looking upon them in sharp survey, turning from one to the other as if scanning each separate feature and comparing them. Her scrutiny over, she muttered some words to herself and turned away, a grim half smile curling her lips as if in mockery of some thought resultant from her inspection.

Joan approached her. "I'm from Halfway, and I came to see if you could come and wash the blankets some day next week. Aunt Hetty sent me and she'd like you to come soon."

"Now would she!" said the woman, with brows adroop over her black eyes. "Well, if Hetty Wisdom stayed home from visiting a few days she could wash the Halfway blankets herself. Tell her I'll do it when the Almighty calls the Jews home." And her mocking laugh rang out in finish to the harsh words. Joan shrank back at the laugh, giving a wondering look at the woman, and would have departed at once, but for Lisbeth. It seemed to her she just couldn't give up knowing a real girl again, and having her come to spend a whole day in the big lonely house. And some spirit

within, the courage that made her now and then not fear Uncle Garret and his harsh ways, suddenly came to her, and wholly unafraid she looked up beseechingly and frankly into the old hard eyes.

"I wish you'd come, so Lisbeth could," she said, "we could have such a good time. She'd love the garden, and the brook, and all over the house. I've never really played one minute since I came there. Won't you please come, and bring her?"

"Couldn't we?" urged Lisbeth with longing look, but puzzled to note the bitter uncivil manner toward the stranger.

The woman laughed again, as mockingly. "Run back home," said she, "if you call it home, but there have been others before you call it that and yet lost it. Run back and give Garret Wisdom and Hetty his second wife my message," and taking the basket of clothes upon her arm she reached out a helping hand to Lisbeth and walked away toward the cabin.

With smarting eyes Joan climbed up the bank and out upon the roadway, hurrying along on her homeward stretch. The sharp words so fiercely uttered gave her a strange fright, like she sometimes felt when Uncle Garret was in one of his passions of temper. Would she dare give him this strange message? And what would Aunt Hetty say to it, herself?

Presently a quick step sounded behind her. She was just at the oak-clump, and somewhat hidden from view. It was Jane-the-Skipper, and for one brief instant Joan's young heart clutched tight with fear at sight of her upon the lonely road.

"Wait," called the woman, soon overtaking her. "I've changed my mind and decided to come. And that message I gave you you can keep to yourself. You'll need to keep many more before you're much older—— What you let loose is hard to bring in again, what you keep back you have. I'll be up on Friday. I wouldn't wash blankets for anybody else on Friday for it's always a fulling day, but it's good enough for Halfway; and Garret Wisdom would hoodoo

the job anyway, lucky day or not. How do you wear your hair?" stepping closer and lifting with a quick hand Joan's hat, "braided and wound around, I see. No need to tell him I'm bringing Lisbeth."

"O, will you, truly?" cried Joan.

"I'll not promise. Friday's a long way off, but remember always to keep a still tongue if you want things to come to pass," and she turned as swiftly as she had approached, and was out of sight behind the bend of the road.

CHAPTER X

AND WHO IS LISBETH?

JOAN could hardly wait with patience for wash day, for though Lisbeth lived in the funny little old cabin and was only a "pick-up" as Phoebe termed it, something drew Joan to her with longing, and the bond that they had discovered of having played together away back in what seemed to them such a distant past, united them in memories, making her almost like real "folks." She had been trying to bring to mind another event of that distant day; it was coming by bits, was not all out plain yet, and she wanted to tell it to Lisbeth to see if between them they could match it up, a memory of which Joan was rather ashamed, if it should prove to be a fact.

"It's not worth while saying anything to your Uncle Garret about the girl coming, till we know she's here," said Aunt Hetty when Joan had returned with the message the Skipper had sent; not that first dreadful one that seemed so profane, making her shudder to even recall it and so full of hatred that she couldn't understand the reason for it—that one she held back, as the Skipper had counselled, but she puzzled over it most every night when she had snuggled down in her feather nest. Why would the woman dislike Aunt Hetty who never seemed to do things to hurt anybody! And why would she feel so ugly and bitter toward Uncle Garret just because he wanted to buy her property! Anyway, what was the odds whether she liked or hated them, so long as she would only come to Halfway and bring Lisbeth for a whole day! And at thought of Lisbeth Joan's face would grow soft, remembering the small wistful one with

the wild-rose colour, in the bridge's shadow, and linking the picture with that other time so long ago when they had escaped from Mrs. Debbie's stern watch and Polly-Ann's fetching and carrying, to wade and wash in the lovely river that Joan's feet had just ached to be paddling in again every time she had passed it.

"Would Uncle Garret mind it much to have her here?" she asked, in answer to Aunt Hetty's injunction as to silence concerning the plan.

"He might and he might not, but he's more likely to than not to," said Aunt Hetty, with the non-committal manner of speech acquired from the ten year's intimate knowledge of her life's partner. But since Joan seemed to long so for the girl's company, Aunt Hetty decided it was best to put her on her guard against provoking opposition beforehand, which was Aunt Hetty's way of getting along, and a very good way too considering the obstacles and hazards that beset her life's race on this third lap of it.

"He is very proud, and doesn't mix up with everybody," said she in explanation. "I am that way myself, somewhat, but your uncle in his old age is extreme, civil to everybody to a certain extent, but wants nothing special to do with people who haven't the backing that he thinks the Wisdoms all have 'from on high,'" said Aunt Hetty with a disdainful tilt of her head that made Joan almost want to laugh, and want to love her too if only the little Aunt had let her, which she didn't. "Though I'll admit," she added, "it's not that he judges mere money and fine clothes alone as signs and seals of the superiority, but something he calls cultivation, and a head to think out things, for generations back. The old schoolmaster whom you'll see when we have our party, who owns only a bit of a place, and hardly enough to live on from hand to mouth, is honoured more by your uncle than the people who have money alone and think that their record depends upon that and their display of it. Probably

he will not like you to be playmate with a girl who came from the Poorhouse."

"O, but Aunt Hetty, she's a dear, and has such pretty hands, and lovely white teeth; and she's not noisy but has the nice kind of quiet way—something like you have," said Joan, spreading a honeyed way to her desire. "O, please don't change your mind about letting her come!"

"Well, we'll risk it," said Aunt Hetty, thus snared; "but you must do what he wants of you meantime, and not provoke him in any way."

So Joan read aloud, kept his jug filled with the freshest of water, and continued the search for the missing periodicals, making herself so really useful in the wing rooms that Uncle Garret was well satisfied at his far sightedness in bringing her to Halfway.

At length wash day dawned, bright and fair, the sun rising above the horizon's rim with unmistakable fervour as if to say, "Well, I'm going to do my best to dry the Halfway woollens in spite of the Squire's and the Skipper's hoodoo." And a gentle breeze that followed in its wake hurried up the long lanes, stirring the balm o' Gilead leaves, and tossing the pine trees' plumes as though adding "Here am I, use me too." At the house everything was in readiness, great pots of water drawn and heated, breakfast cleared away, and a steaming pot of coffee upon the back of the range for the pedestrians' refreshment.

"I'm almost afraid even to look down the lane, for fear I'll never see her coming up it," announced Joan from the steps that commanded the pine tree's stretch, watching with eager eyes, and listening meantime with ears intent to hear if perchance a call should summon her to the wing rooms. But Uncle Garret was at his desk occupied over papers and documents; and there was even a possibility that some men were coming whose business might keep him diverted for much of the day.

Presently Joan gave a glad cry and started on a run down

the long line, for she had sighted them, Jane and Lisbeth both, just entering the gates; and meeting them there, up the walk they came, Jane ahead, Joan and Lisbeth lagging a bit behind.

Aunt Hetty stared at sight of them. She had advised Joan, early morning though it was, to put on a white dress and one of the silk sashes she had purchased for her, feeling in some indefinable way that it would be a hall-mark of distinction to make both Jane and the girl see that though they would be treated kindly, Lisbeth was not to be on an equal footing with Joan. But here was the girl herself in a white frock, patterned like the simple one Joan had worn to the cabin, her hair that had then hung down her back in braids, plaited smooth and wound about her head as Joan did hers! And though Lisbeth's eyes were black where Joan's were blue, and there was not a similar feature save the lustrous tresses, yet the contour of their faces was not unlike, and both were of a height, with a slender grace of stature.

The stranger came shyly forward, rather abashed if it had not been for Joan's hearty presentation, and Jane-the-Skipper's glance was sharp to see what Mrs. Wisdom's welcome would be, a satisfaction settling upon her hard face at hearing the kindly greeting and receiving the steaming coffee.

"Can I show her every bit of the house? We won't disturb a thing!" begged Joan. And at consent the newcomer was taken around all the rooms, a walk through the spacious hall and parlours, a survey of the sweet scented chambers so redolent of cool retreat, with a longer stay in Joan's own bedroom whose high four-poster and chest of drawers, with the chintz covered chairs and ottomans, seemed grand furnishings to the girl who rolled into her wall-bunk for her night's repose, and had only a sailor's chest for her own scanty belongings.

"Then there's all the next story full of rooms," said Joan,

"lower-roofed ones and a garret above that; and the garden, and the spring—— O, my, there's the brook too! Why it'll be night before we get half through, Lisbeth!"

And just then Aunt Hetty summoned them downstairs, where out upon the greensward by the kitchen door sat two big hogshead-tubs of soapy water, containing the blankets, which the girls were to "tread!"

O, how funny it seemed to Joan who had never heard before of such a process, but not to the washerwoman's girl, for she and Jane had often washed them thus, to save elbow grease and muscle, as well as to preserve the soft texture of the home woven wools. Off went their shoes and stockings, a tuck up of the white frocks, a dip of feet into a separate tub for cleanliness, a run over the green grass, and then into the warm soapy water so soft and slippery—trampling and treading the contents, jumping out upon the sward again while Jane poked and prodded and turned over the mass, in once more, and out, till finally the last rinsings were accomplished and the blankets squeezed and shaken were ready to spread out to the breeze and the sun that had so neighbourly proffered their help.

The girls were free. But the pink and white wrinkled feet that hopped out from the last rinsing had given them an idea.

"It's like that other day, isn't it?" asked Lisbeth, "when we waded in the river!"

"And thereupon Joan clapped her hands. "Why couldn't we go really wading again, now, down in our brook?" So Aunt Hetty was besought for permission, with a lunch as well, that they might have their dinner together by the brook side.

It proved a stroke of great good fortune for Aunt Hetty, who had been turning over in her mind with much concern just how she should manage the dinner, whether dining room or kitchen for Lisbeth, who seemed to Joan at least, a guest

rather than a worker at Halfway. Dinner at the brook was surely a solution, so consent was readily given.

"Get some fresh water up," said she. "And this is 'Free Press' day, so you'll need to go to the office in the afternoon if Pelig is not free. Lisbeth can walk on with you there instead of waiting to go the long way round later with Jane."

"O, how good you are to let us go!" cried Joan out of the fulness of her young heart, and she wished she might dare to give Aunt Hetty a hug and a kiss for it, but kisses and hugs were forgotten or omitted joys, in the Halfway life. For since the pains in his joints had afflicted Uncle Garret, he had shut up within his heart all thought of love expressed, letting his calamity be a wilderness within which not only himself must wander, but all who journeyed on life's pathway with him; the caress of word or touch that might have been as fallen manna or gushing stream to make glad the solitary places, unuttered and unproffered. So Aunt Hetty thus forced to get out of the way of expressed affection, had never bestowed upon Joan even a kiss. Often in the evenings when they talked a little while sometimes before going up to bed, Joan would feel almost sure enough of her to offer one with her good-night, but suddenly the little aunt would slip away out of approach, into her patchwork, and her enforced reticence, and Joan would not dare try it. Yet it seemed to her that she would just have to find some one to love, so wakened was she in this budding year of womanhood, so filled with joy at having a real place to stay, after all her lonely sojournings; for even though the uncle and aunt were stern and cold of manner it was beginning to be now like a true home, and she had never realised it as fully as to-day when showing Lisbeth around it.

Well, if the uncle and aunt were loth to love, here was Lisbeth, whom she could pet to her heart's content! And the two girls walked down the path to the spring with arms interlocked, slowly, because Lisbeth's limp made the stepping un-

even, though Joan was quick to accommodate her own to its halting.

"We haven't got a lovely river at Halfway, like you have," said Joan when they came to the spring, its brimming water o'erflowing the stone walls that cupped its depths. "But this is lovely in another way, and sometimes when I'm awfully still I think I can hear it coming up from where it starts, though there isn't even a single bubble moving on it."

"Do you know where it does come from?" asked Lisbeth. "Could it drain way back from our river?"

"Dear knows, I don't. Uncle Garret says it's always been here—like the Wisdom roses I suppose, though Aunt Hetty says it was the bride, that brought them to Halfway, riding on a black horse behind her husband—O, Lisbeth, can't you see her? I think about her nights after I go to bed, and wouldn't I just like to be a bride, riding on a black horse! The roses are coming in bud now, and Phoebe says Uncle Garret is always better natured when they are blooming and that we keep big bunches of them around the rooms. I've never picked a rose in all my life, and I'm just dying to pick some of our own here, the Wisdom kind. Do you have them at your house?"

"No roses, nor anything else could grow in our rocky yard. We even had to have holes drilled to put the clothes poles in——"

"Why of course you wouldn't have them, anyway," interrupted Joan. "How queer it is. I keep thinking you are one of the family. I don't suppose you even know the story; Aunt Hetty and Phoebe both told me, and I'll tell it to you now—— And so that's why all the Wisdoms love it," she added at the story's close.

"But they couldn't have brought the spring with them too," laughed Lisbeth. "It must have been here always, as your uncle says, like our river. But what is that hole in the side for?"

"It leads into a pipe that goes down to the house, and we

get all our water from it, except what we catch in a tank for washing, and things like that. Even what comes to the house is lovely and cool, but Uncle Garret won't drink it, so we have to get it fresh from here for him three or four times every day, and just at bedtime again. I don't blame him either, for O, it does taste great straight out of where it comes from. I never saw anybody drink as much as he does, though, and I'm getting to be so thirsty for it myself that I often run up here with a dipper to get it cool, and doesn't it feel good going down my throat! Are you the thirsty-kind too? Aunt Hetty says all the family are."

"I'm a thirsty-kind all right," answered Lisbeth, "but you're forgetting again, I'm not one of your family. Jane says it's a bad habit to drink so much and that the more you do the more you want to, and she doesn't like to see me 'at it again,' that's what she calls it. But it's queer too, she puts a cupful on the chest every night, after I've gone to bed, where I could reach out and get it if I wanted it. I hardly ever do, but it's lovely to just know it's there if I should. She only does it lately, and never wants me to talk about it, but it's always there when I wake. There's another hole, Joan, and a place that looks like where a hole was stoned up again."

Joan looked down close into the sparkling depths. "What sharp eyes you have, Lisbeth. I never noticed that plugged up one before—the other must go to the barns and down to where the family live who do most of the farm work. At that old ugly School where I was before I came here, they were laying pipes a long way, and we girls had to help dig and lay them, so I know about how it's done—but my, we'd better hurry back or we'll have no time left for the picnic!" And back to the house they hastened, straight up the side steps to Uncle Garret's rooms and within the door before Joan had thought at all what she was doing or remembered Aunt Hetty's enjoining.

The old man was sitting at his desk, back to the outer

door. Hearing the footsteps he turned his head as they entered. The bunch of papers he was just clasping with a band fell a-flutter to the floor. Joan hurried forward to pick them up, but he stayed her hand. "Let them be," said he. "Who have you here?"

"It's Lisbeth," said Joan, filled with consternation at the plight she had brought upon herself.

"And who is Lisbeth?"

"She lives with Jane, in the cabin, you know, and she's here with her to-day washing the blankets and quilts."

Ah! That was where he had seen her before, several years ago when he had gone to bargain with Jane for the Corner lot—— The startled strained look that had swept up over his face at sight of them, passed away. "If she is here to wash, why is she not at work?" asked he coldly.

Joan scented danger ahead, perhaps even a cancelling of their picnic together, probably sharp words for Lisbeth herself. It must be averted, if possible.

"We have both been helping," said she; "Lisbeth stopped to go with me for the water."

"Well, let her go to work again. I expected to need you here this afternoon, but some men are coming shortly, and I have their business to transact. Pick up the papers, put them in the lower left hand drawer; fill up my jug, and send your Aunt Hetty to me. Also do not fail to get off early for the mail," said he, paying no attention whatever to Lisbeth who still stood just inside the doorway, her eyes feasting with a strange content that she could not have expressed and scarce herself understood, upon the fine old room; its brown beamed ceiling; its row of windows toward the west, their upper sashes cathedral-paned and Gothic arched; the great fire-place that stretched across the farther end, its brick rich-tinted with Time and the fires of successive generations; resting at last with calm scrutiny upon the old man as he gave to Joan his final orders.

When Joan joined her she was last to leave the room, turn-

ing on the threshold for another look, as if loth to leave it. And the master of Halfway swinging around sharp on his swivel chair to watch them as they departed, met the full glance of her soft shadowy eyes, not wistful, appealing, and fearless, as were Joan's, by turn, but calm and compelling, as she inclined her head with a little quick bob of salutation in departure.

He did not return it, yet he followed them with his gaze all down the walk till they turned at the garden gate, and a scowl settled upon his face to see them walking thus, arms about each other's waist. A workhouse chit, here at Halfway, apparently on equal terms with Joan—pretty faced, but probably a bold girl if brought up by that woman—she must not be allowed again at Halfway—— He would see to it at once. And that was what Aunt Hetty's summons meant, but her kindly Fortune intervened just as she reached the rooms, in the person of the men upon business intent, so Aunt Hetty got off scot-free, for that time at least, and she hurried the two girls away as quickly as possible, for Joan had confessed her mistake in taking Lisbeth inside, and Uncle Garret's treatment of her.

"She'll not likely be let to set foot here again, so run off and have your day together," said the little aunt. "Here is your basket. Be sure to be back in time with the mail, and if the girl is too tired to walk on home she can rest at Dempsey's Corner where Pelig will pick her up when he takes Jane back, if she'll be taken."

And they were away! across the soft turfed, hummocky pasture lands, to the brook where the other Joan Wisdoms had waded and played in the years agone.

CHAPTER XI

THE ROAD TO MEADOW ISLAND

NOW, isn't it the dearest little brook?" asked Joan when she had set forth its glories of waterfall and pebbly pool, and the two sat eating their lunch in the shade of the tall elm on whose branches the bobolinks tilted at morn and eve, trilling their liquid notes. "I always feel just like a little bit of a girl when I'm down here, but your river is so still, and big, it must make you feel grown up and solemn. This one is so funny and noisy, and always in such a hurry as if it had a lot to do, and all it ever carries is leaves; but I suppose a brook isn't grown up and so it doesn't have to work hard like a river does."

"Jane says the folks who make the most noise about it do the least, and so we hardly ever talk much when we're washing there, though I'd often like to, for when I'm outdoors I feel all alive and awake, someway, so different from when I'm in the house. Will we wade right in here when we get through our lunch? It was way up by the creek where we went in that other time, nearer Mrs. Debbie's house. I walked over to the place that next day after you came down, and it seemed so queer to be getting it out of my mind so far back. It all came clear after a while, but I can't remember as quick as you do. Is it a Wisdom fashion to have a good memory, like you said your Aunt Hetty called being so 'thirsty' was?"

"I guess it must be," said Joan, "for Uncle Garret scolded me awfully, once, for saying I forgot something, and he remembers everything himself, the page of the book where I leave off reading to him, and sometimes even the last words.

And down at the office the Postmaster said all the Wisdoms could remember everything they ever did. He called it a 'gift,' and said that everybody had some special thing given them when they were born, that they could do better than they could do the things they were only taught to do, and that we have to use that to get on in the world with, and give an account of it when we get to Heaven. It's a nice idea, and I like the Postmaster. It seems queer though to call him Cousin Alexander when he's so big and tall."

"Jane says he's the best man in the whole country, but I've only seen him a few times. I haven't been allowed around much, and if you only knew, Joan, how wonderful it is to be a whole day away, like this, and with you, and at Halfway that I didn't ever expect to get inside of! I'm half afraid it's only one of those fine things I make up, and not truly real after all."

"It's just as true as true," answered Joan, "and when you're not real sure about things, then you always ought to give yourself a pinch, like this," administering a sly, sharp one to Lisbeth's arm. "My, why you haven't got much on your arm to pinch but clear bone—— You aren't sick, are you? Is it your knee that keeps you so thin, Lisbeth? Does it hurt any to-day? You haven't got your crutch at all. Tell me true."

"It doesn't hurt one bit, but what makes you want to know? Did you think I couldn't go wading?"

Joan shook her head. "I'll tell you why. It's because we aren't going wading after all, but down that dear little crooked road that I told you about, if you think it won't tire you. Wouldn't you love to see where it goes to? I'll tell you what makes me want to get onto it. I've kept it back all day till we got off by ourselves, and I want you to think real hard and see if you can help me. Don't you remember that day you were up to Mrs. Betty's and we played in the river, that we went somewhere else, with a basket, to get something for Mrs. Betty, to such a nice house, and we had dinner

there in a room that you went down steps to, like at your place, Lisbeth?"

"I can't seem to remember," said Lisbeth.

"Well, keep running it over in your mind hard as you can and see if it won't shake out. That's what I did, ever since I first went by that road the day I came here—only the very tiniest bit to begin with, as if I had been on it, and had someone by the hand. But it's been coming and coming bit by bit, and now I do really believe it was *down that road* we went that day with a basket. So let's go over it again, and see if we can really find a house at the end! You see we did go paddling in the water, though it was a tub instead of a river, and if we go on this road now and find it truly was that other one, why we'll be doing exactly the things we did before, and won't it be wonderful? Will you go? We can walk slow and easy."

"Of course we will! You think of the loveliest things to do," exclaimed Lisbeth. "And if we really found a house there, would we go in it?"

"That's what I'm going to decide if we truly find it, for there's something else goes with us being there that I'm not just sure about yet, but I think if we can find the house that it will make all the rest come out plain——"

"Here's somebody coming up the path," interrupted Lisbeth.

"O, it's Phoebe!" said Joan rather concernedly. "Aunt Hetty said she was sure Phoebe would smell the washing and come up before they got through."

"Didn't she want her to come?"

"She said Phoebe would want to step right in and boss the job, for she thinks she owns Halfway and all that goes on there; and that there would be trouble if she did."

The other nodded in confirmation, "I know, she and Jane don't seem to like each other much, and Jane would leave right off in the middle if Phoebe took a hand in it. Phoebe is good, though. She came and took care of me once when

I had the shingles. Jane was sick too, and she was so good to us and wouldn't ever let us pay her anything. Jane says she is kind inside but prickly and three-cornered like a beech nut and hard to get at the meat."

"Phoebe approached slowly, apparently not aware of their presence, shaded as they were beneath the elm trees drooping green.

"Shingles is a queer sickness to have," said Joan. "I never heard of it before."

" 'Shingles and rickets,' that's what she called it. We didn't know what it was ourselves till she came. It's not nice to have, but Phoebe said it either killed or cured you, and she took such fine care of me that I didn't die—and I guess she was right about it curing me, for I never had any colour in my face till after that, and all the ugly freckles went away, and my hair grew so long and——"

Here Phoebe sighted them, and crossing the brook with sure steps, stood confronting them where they sat, looking from one to the other with questioning glance. But Phoebe was never long in doubt. "Umph," said she. "Two of a feather, all right."

"This is Lisbeth," explained Joan, prettily doing the honours for her guest.

Phoebe sniffed—"You're rather a new-comer to be making introductions to me who have lived here all my life." But in spite of the sharp words her face softened at survey of the two fresh sweet faces under the greening shade, and she turned to the strange girl. "You and I have sat some hard nights out. What a spindly little mite you were, scrawny enough to knuckle under, but I'm glad to see you pulled through so well. I told you it would kill or cure."

The prickles were evidently not as sharp as usual, and Joan was relieved.

"I was telling her about how you took care of me," said Lisbeth. "It was awfully good of you to do it."

"Never mind that now—— How did you get up here?"

"We're up at Halfway to-day, washing, Jane and I——"

Phoebe smiled facetiously. "Jane and I," she mimicked. "Evidently you're not a working partner on the job. I knew Jane was there so I thought I'd call up and find out the latest way of washing woollens," said she grimly. "Every Halfway blanket is handwoven, and soft as down, one poor washing will ruin them. When I saw you two sitting here I thought I must be seeing double. You're like peas of the same pod."

"O, Phoebe, do you really mean we look alike?" cried Joan with joy. "I'd love for us to, but I haven't got lovely pink cheeks like Lisbeth has. Do we really?"

"You do and you don't," said Phoebe, in such exact imitation of Aunt Hetty's tentative noncommittal speech that Joan began to laugh before she thought what she was doing, suppressing it with a quick tightening of lips that did not escape the shrewd eyes. "Don't be afraid of a good honest laugh outside, it's better than a smirky hidden one inside and as for looking alike, I don't see why you wouldn't. You've both got hands and feet, and a white frock apiece. Jane must be getting on in business to fix you up like you're rigged to-day." This last shot to Lisbeth who had risen and was reaching up now with one hand and now the other, pulling down the interlacing boughs that hung like a festooned tent around the great elm, a slender agile grace about her movements that made her seem a part of the greenwood scene. Phoebe surveyed her for a full minute without speech. "What you needed was good clothes, to bring you out," said she. "A pink sash to match your cheeks, and one would think you belonged to Halfway instead of where you do—but don't get proud on account of good clothes. Usually we get along in the world better with good ones, but after all, they're just a covering for our nakedness!" and Phoebe was gone.

"O, goody good!" exclaimed Joan. "She never asked us what we were doing or where we were going, and I was so

afraid she would. You don't mind what she said, Lisbeth? It's just Phoebe's manner, I guess."

"One of those prickly corners! No, I don't mind, for of course it's true, and I am only what I am, even if I do have a new dress on. Let's hurry away. Why were you afraid she'd ask us where we were going? Is it anything wrong to do?"

"I don't see how it could be, for nobody told us not to. But it's nice to do it without everybody knowing, so there'll be a mystery about it; don't you love a mystery? We'll take the basket and go hand in hand just like we did that other time. O, my but it's great to have a girl to be with again!"

Starting away they were soon across the pasture, up and over and down the hard-wood hill, across the stile, along the highway, and presently their little road came to view, sylvan and sweet and winding, far as eye could reach.

"Hu-s-hh-sh!" commanded Joan upon its threshold, fingers to her lips—"let's pretend it's enchanted, and tip-toe in, and not speak till we've counted a hundred, then make a wish —I know what I'll wish—hu-s-sh!"

So, light and stealthily they entered its portal and stepped along the green delicious mystery of the grassy way. How soft and cool the old turf was to their young feet, how sheltering the great arch of pines that stretched overhead, how fragrant the odorous balm of cone and needle that made brown the roadside bed. Like wood nymphs they trod it, their fresh faces raised to hear the tree-tops' tune, their blue and black eyes peering ahead to catch the glimpses beyond the curves and turns.

"One hundred, and my wish!" said Joan. "I made a beautiful one. Did you?" And soon the music of their girlish voices broke the hushed green silence.

"I'm trying to see if I can get my mind back to that other day," she said, "and I know now that I've always remembered this, but didn't know it was real. At that School there weren't any trees around the place, and at nights I used to

think of a lovely winding road with trees growing up a steep hill on each side of it, exactly like these do, and I used to put myself asleep going up and up it with them. I got to just love it, but thought I had only imagined it, and all the time it was a real place! We'll come again some day after we've found out where it ends, and climb the hill, with the trees. I bet you I'll beat them out!"

"I'm beginning to remember about it now, too," said Lisbeth, "we didn't walk back, because somebody was sick and a waggon came after us quick. It's so queer to be doing it all over again."

"It isn't a bit queerer than lots of things we do every day of our lives, only we get used to them, that's all the difference. I think out so many things, nights, that they don't really seem queer when they do happen. They're not all going to come true like this has, of course, but some of them are, because I'm going to make them, Lisbeth. Down inside me I feel so strong and tough, as if I could do such hard things and big things, and I wonder how I'll ever get at them. Do you?"

"Not very much, because always I'm so tired when I get to bed that I go straight asleep, and the only four things I imagine over and over, are lovely woods like this, for I hate houses and being shut up in them, unless it would be Halfway, perhaps. That's why we wash in the river. I coaxed Jane till she let us, and now she likes it too, and she says she hates a roof over her head always, and wonders why she never thought of that way to get out from under one. The three other things are that I'll not be lame; and that I'll know about my father and mother some day and——" here Lisbeth paused a moment and looked away from her companion; "the last one is that I'd like to have a lovely rainbow silk sash with fringe, like I saw a girl from town have, tied in big bow and streamers. It just made a pain like a knife in my heart when I saw it and knew that I couldn't ever have one myself. It doesn't go in with my life, just as Phoebe said, and not having one on is what shows that I don't really belong

to your kind of folks and Halfway. Your blue one is lovely, Joan, and you know what I mean, don't you? I don't mind a bit, your having it, because you're so nice and good, but that other girl was proud and hateful, and it doesn't seem right that just because I'm so poor I have to go without such a beautiful thing as a rainbow sash—— And so you see the things I think about and want aren't very apt to come out true."

"You've got to *make* them come!" said Joan. "You imagined the woods, and being outdoors, and you made that come true, yourself, by going outside instead of staying in all sudsy and hot. So you'll have to think up a way to get the other things too. Keep saying to yourself you will, and in some way, I don't know how, but you'll do it all right. Ask Jane to find out about your mother and father. And I'll help about your knee, because Uncle Garret has a Doctor come to see him sometimes, and we could ask him how to cure it. I have never known my father or mother, either, Lisbeth, so you see we're alike in that."

"I've asked Jane about mine, and if I had any real relations in the world, and she says what's the need of trying to find out, that you can't keep off the thing that's coming to you, nor turn back the one that's hurrying away, and if I have any real folks of my own that we'll find each other out if it's to be."

The small sweet face of Joan grew sober and firm with some hidden force. "I'm not going to wait for my things to come," said she, "I'm going to reach out and bring them to me, and maybe reach out and keep them from going away, too. There's such a lot of something in me, strong, that wants to be doing something hard and big, like I told you before. I don't see what chance I'll ever have at it living here, but O, I do love being here, and it's so beautiful to have a real home for the first time in all my life. Lisbeth, you look away on the other side of the road till I tell you to turn. I want to do something you can't see. Will you?"

But Lisbeth's eyes would not stay away, for she had caught a flash of blue and heard a tug of breath, and turning about she found Joan with her silken sash freed from her waist, folding it in an even roll.

"What ever are you doing?" she asked. "I couldn't help seeing."

"I don't care, now it's off and done," said Joan with satisfaction, tucking the blue roll down in her pocket. "I'd have scrunched it up quick and had it out of sight before you could have seen at all, but it wouldn't have been fit to wear that way, and I'll have to put it on again before I get back to Halfway."

"But what did you take it off for, anyway? Joan—you didn't think I minded——" and the soft black eyes so full of yearning sudden o'erbrimmed with tears.

Joan smiled, the little crooked bravado smile that was so close to her own tears, and she battled them off. "It isn't anything to do. We'll just be really alike now, to-day, that's all. It only just *happens* that I had one, anyway. I wasn't born with one on any more than you were!"

The other caught the spirit and rose above the tears as Joan had. "According to Jane I'll get mine if it's coming to me, and according to you I've got to get it myself, so it's all right anyhow, and you're so beautiful, Joan, to do it. But do look, the woods is getting thin, and I can see a field; we must be coming out to something. If it's a house, will we go in?"

"Let's stop a minute and make up our minds."

"We'll have to turn *'withershins'* then for good luck."

"What's that? It's a funny sounding word."

"It's what Jane always makes us do when we can't decide things. You turn from west to east, like the sun and the moon and the stars go, she says, and you'll make your mind up lucky—this way—" and Lisbeth seizing Joan by the hand began a pirouette upon the grassy way.

"O, dear," panted Joan, out of breath. "It's almost as

if it was going to be really an enchanted castle at the end of our lovely road! I've made up my mind already, but I'll have to tell you why. I've kept it back till now, because it isn't out quite plain even yet. When we came here before, the one they call Polly Ann who brought me down here, gave me a letter to take to somebody at the house we were going to with the basket; and don't you remember there was an awful queer table that we had dinner on, that when the woman cleared it off she made into a chair, and let us roll it back against the wall. Did you ever hear of a table like that, around here anywhere?"

Lisbeth nodded. "Jane says it's the only kind we could ever have in the cabin, because there's so little room there. We eat on a shelf that lets down and up. And I knew I'd seen one somewhere, when she told me about one there is at the Island—and I thought it must have been at the Poor-farm, for you see I hardly ever go out where Jane does. But all the time it must have been this very place down here, if there really is a place when we get there."

"The Island!" Joan was turning over quick in her mind whether she should say anything to Lisbeth about it, or not. If she began at all she must needs tell the whole story, that she was forbidden to go there even though the people living on it were her very own relations, as much as Uncle Garret himself was. And it would hardly be right, perhaps, to talk about things that only belonged to Halfway doings. So by the time Lisbeth had stopped speaking, Joan's little clever ready mind was made up. She would not notice the reference to the Island at all, but go on with her story.

"Of course there's going to be the place, Lisbeth, for I'm remembering it all just as plain as plain can be, and I can tell you now what I did with that letter. Don't you know the cunning drawers there were underneath the chair part of that table to keep the knives and spoons and things, and one of them was a teenty narrow one that wouldn't open for us and we thought it might be a hiding-place and full of gold?

Well, when whoever it was came to take us away I went back to see if I couldn't get it open myself, and I thought the letter would help pry it, and it slipped in out of sight instead, and I had to go so quick I forgot to tell the woman who was there; and when I got back to Mrs. Debbie's, Polly Ann was sick and we started right off for way out West again. And I guess I must have forgotten all about it, till after she died, because I can remember now being sorry I hadn't told her. But then it must have got all covered up with the other things that happened in my life for I never thought of it again, ever, till I saw this road, when I came by in the coach. And it was just little specks at first, though I've tried and tried to get it out plain, till we got started here to-day, when it just shook itself out all the while we've been coming, and it's so plain now, Lisbeth, that I *know* there's going to be a house at the end, and I do believe I could find that table with my eyes shut."

"But it mighten't be there yet, and the letter would have likely been cleared out long ago, whenever they'd clean the table. Do you suppose it made any difference to anybody, it getting lost that way? Do you know who it was for?"

"I don't know another thing but that I've told you. Lisbeth, do you see! we're coming to the house around the very next turn. I caught a peek of the roof through the trees, but it seems quite a long way off yet, across some fields. Quick, let's see it exactly together," and she reached out her hand for Lisbeth's slender white one, holding it in tight clasp as they rounded the last curve and came out upon a broad stretch of open meadow, in the very centre of which, on a somewhat elevated portion, stood a low spreading house.

"I told you so!" cried Joan delightedly. "We'll ask for a drink of water, or if they have a garden we can ask for some flowers, and maybe it will be somebody who'll know me, anyway, by my looks. That's the very first thing everybody around here says, that I look exactly like the Wisdoms—I don't see how I could look any other way if I'm 'a

Wisdom clear through,' as Cousin Alexander says. Are you tired, Lisbeth? We could rest."

"Not a bit, because I'm excited, and that keeps off the tired feeling. We have to leave the road just ahead, Joan, for it turns down into a lane, and O, I see, there's a brook, or some kind of water we've got to cross, and where's the bridge over it? O, Joan," as they turned another bend and came to a nearer view of the house set in its sea of green—"It's the Island!"

"The Island?" said Joan incredulously, "how could it be an island when it's all land!" and then a phrase of Uncle Garret's stilted speech came to her recollection—*"In this case it is a piece of land higher than its surrounding meadow"* —the place she had been forbidden to visit! forbidden to even ask about! The Island! Her cheeks turned pallid with the sudden intense emotion of the thought, and its problems involved.

"There always was a bridge over it, it's a part of the creek, but isn't very deep," said Lisbeth, in the interest of the adventure not noticing the other's concern. "I heard Jane telling about it, but your uncle had the bridge taken away because the people here wouldn't sell him some land he wanted to buy, like he wanted to buy ours and Jane wouldn't let him have it. So they only can have some planks across the creek and he has them taken away too, and they have to keep putting down new ones. Isn't it funny, Joan, for grown up people to be cross like that, but I can't say much, because Jane gets that way too, often, and doesn't like the folks around here, except the Postmaster and his wife, and these people who live at the Island. She calls the woman the Queen of Sheba, and she does look like a queen too."

"Why, were you ever here before? You didn't know you were coming to it, did you?" Joan was fencing, while her mind was trying to work out her problem.

"It was quite a time ago, and I wasn't really inside the

house. We had been down to the mines for a week, working at the manager's, and they were driving us home and we stopped here for something. But we were not on this road, it's another, a long way around one, that comes up from the mines. They have to go all that way round now, Jane says, for a horse and waggon can't get across just two planks. It must be hard, for they are old folks, a man and a woman—and Jane says they are the salt of the earth, and have a flower-garden that you'd think was the Garden of Eden—all in front of the house. So we can ask for a drink and a flower both, just as you planned. We're going, aren't we?"

Joan's eyes were shining, steely blue and yearning, by turn, the steely glint for the harsh old uncle who had torn up the bridge, the yearning for the two in the spreading house in the midst of its emerald sea—the Queen of Sheba who must be Aunt Orin, and the brother who must be Uncle Amsey, her very own people, exactly as much as Halfway and Uncle Garret were hers! Was she going to see them! Indeed she was!

"Of course I am," she said, "and you mustn't ask me any questions about it, but I'll tell you this much. We're not very good friends, the Halfway folks and the Island folks. I don't understand about it myself, but the Island people are the very same relation to me that the others are, and I've never been to see them yet, so I'm going to-day, Lisbeth."

It was settled. And on they went, coming presently to the narrow footbridge that spanned the banks of the creek which almost circled the meadows surrounding the Island house, branching off at a thick copse of wood to join the larger stream called the river.

"It's tickly-bender," pronounced Joan, going ahead to try the planks, "and you'll have to step careful as careful can be. It isn't wide enough for two together or I'd hold your hand. But it's not such very deep water even if we did fall in," peering down to the creek beneath. "I'm going to ask

Pelig to come down this very day and put some more boards across."

"But he couldn't if he is Mr. Wisdom's hired man, for he'd tell him not to, and you don't do things that people who are over you tell you not to," said Lisbeth, steadying each step as she made her way over the suspended planks.

Her companion heard, but did not let it hurt nor deter, for her young heart was hot with the indignation and the yearning that had o'erwhelmed to her blue eyes. And safely across, the two entered the picket gate and approached the house.

CHAPTER XII

IT MUST BE PHILIP'S GRANDCHILD

THE old Island house with its broad stone steps faced fair the garden plot which blossomed across all its front, a fairy space where ragged-robin and heliotrope, pinks and peonies, roses and sweet-rocket tossed their gay heads with langourous scents. No day through all the summer long but some fresh bloom met the loving glance of the old eyes that watched for them along the bordered walks, no night but their sweet breath crept inside the house through the open casements, laden with the rich fragrance that night alone brings forth.

The wide door, its casing set round about with mullioned panes, swung fully open this warm afternoon into the main apartment, a hall-like sitting room which extended clear across the house, with fire-place at the farther end, and low windows upon either side. At one of the windows sat an old man, whittling out a button from a piece of white-wood, a newspaper spread upon the floor beside him to catch the shavings. Around his neck was knotted a black silk kerchief, a black and purple cardigan jacket served for coat, and he was humming as he whittled, a chanty song of the halyards, that had someway strayed up among the green meadows, like Captain Nat upon his high hill, away from the thrash and roar of the sea and its surf.

"A smart little packet lay out on the bay,
To me way hay, O—hio——
A-waiting for a fair wind to get under way——
A long, long, time—ago—O."

At the other window, in a highbacked splint chair, her feet raised from the floor upon its wide foot-rest, sat a woman reading. On the little stand pulled close beside her was her work-basket, a pile of small volumes, and her opened writing desk. Her high forehead was white and unlined, a strange contrast to the seamed and wrinkled face below it; the white brow, like Garret Wisdom's, seeming like a marble temple for the clear blue eyes that dwelt therein; young fresh eyes, hers were, like a child's, unclouded in vision, but mystic too, as if they had seen long sights, as indeed they had, for Orin Wisdom had passed the fourscore years of life. And though another, transcendent and eternal stretched before her, close at hand, she was going forth toward it, as assured and unafraid.

For half a century she had taught a select school for girls and boys, in a distant town, relinquishing it only when she had reached the three score and ten, always accepting her "gift" to do it as from on High. And though school was long let out for Orin Wisdom, she was still the teacher personified; where'er she sat the lamp of knowledge burned. The Queen of Sheba, Jane had termed her, and aptly too; her sceptre and orb were the ferule and rule of scholastic authority, the royal garments of splendour her personality and her atmosphere. Invisible they were to actual sight but the hired boy who might falter and equivocate to Amsey as to stolen hen's nests and rifled strawberry bed, told a straight tale to Orin; the tin peddlar who watched his chance to get off a dull and spotted pan upon the womenfolk with whom he traded, and who tipped with sly and bulky hand to make the scales run light in the butter and rags he took in exchange, held his scale aloft and clear, when he dealt with the Island mistress, picking out for her his shiniest tins; and never a man in all her walks had passed her with pipe between his lips, but held decorously or shamefacedly in hand till she had swept him by, the "awe and majesty" of her bearing evoking without ever needing to demand.

Only her brother Amsey she did not dominate. Him she loved, petted, and humoured, at her woman's will. He was brother, sister, husband and child, in one, for they two were now, so far as they knew, the only ones left of the Island Wisdoms, the handsome scapegrace brother Philip being long agone from them and from life itself. What had taken her thoughts back that day to his young gay youth? Why, as she now and then met the glance of the old brother across the hearth did she see beside him Phil's dark handsome face! What had brought to her ear the sound of his voice, that musical voice with a cadence in its tone and an upward lilt to his phrasing? What had seemed to fill the very room with his presence, when he had never set foot within it for fifty years and more? So strange and strong the feeling that she had dropped her tatting, and taken a book to read, to change her thoughts!

Why was it strange! What stranger than that we think at all—see one another, hear, or feel? While he was filling all her fancy, down that shady sylvan road was coming his grandchild; and while he seemed in the very room itself, the grandchild was walking up the scented garden path, and stood in the broad old doorway of the Home where he was born.

Orin Wisdom, intent upon her reading, had not heard the steps approaching, and looked up only at the gentle rap which sounded upon her ear, looked up to see the two figures framed in the old portal, Joan foremost, the fearless and the longing look, both, within the blue eyes that met the older gaze.

"Who are you?" asked Orin Wisdom in the straightforward word of her race.

And she met the same direct speech in the answer. "I am Joan Wisdom."

"*Joan Wisdom,*" repeated the woman wonderingly. "I do not understand you. Where are you from? How are you here?"

"I am up at Halfway, and O, don't you know——"

But the old trembling hand rapped with authority upon the table.

"Tell me who you are, and where you came from to Halfway."

"I came from out West to stay here. Uncle Garret—sent for me."

"Uncle?"

"O, yes," cried Joan, all this while still upon the threshold, that authoritative voice like a wall to bar the entrance. "He is my great-uncle, they call it, and you are the same down here, and I thought, O, I thought you'd be glad to see me——"

All this while the stern clear blue eyes within the room still peered deep into the young waiting ones upon the threshold, questioning, searching, proving—and then she opened wide her arms.

"It must be Philip's grandchild!" she cried, "if you speak true—my pet!" And Joan was folded close within them, and there would never more be a wall between.

"My pet, Phil, my pet—" crooned the old voice, and she lifted the girl's face and looked into it again, searchingly—"So like Philip—— So like them both!"

"It seems to me it's my turn," said the old man, "nobody's introduced us, though."

Aunt Orin pushed Joan over toward him.

"Guess I'll follow suit and greet you warm as Orin did," he chuckled whimsically. "How'd do, dear? Come here and have a good bear hug. If I get up I'll scatter all the whittlings, and be stood up in school." And he reached out both his hands, which Joan was not a bit slow in accepting, nor did she oppose his bruin hug, but sat boldly and contentedly down upon his knee while he talked with her. "Tell us all about it," said he. "How did you come, and where have you been all your life, and what does it all mean? We heard yesterday that there was a girl up at Halfway, but Halfway folks and us are 'out,' so we ask peo-

ple no questions about their doings. We thought, though, that it must be some connection of Hetty's. And it was Phil's grandchild—Phil's!"

And then it came to all three at once that there was another guest at the Island. She still stood in the shadow of the doorway, outside, for she had not been asked within, and from thence had been a spectator of the meeting, half-envious, half-wondering, at the warmth of the welcome, and the surprise of the old people at Joan's existence.

"Who else have we here?" asked Aunt Orin of Joan. "Come forward girl."

Joan sprang to meet her. "It's Lisbeth," she said, "you know, don't you? She lives with Jane at the cabin, and she's at Halfway to-day with her. Aunt Hetty is having the blankets all washed and Jane is helping us."

Aunt Orin extended a hand in welcome, the courtly sceptred hand. And it did not please Joan who had been hugged and loved. She thought Lisbeth shrank back at the formal tone, and she leaned her head down quick against Aunt Orin's face. "O, love her, too, won't you? She's nice and dear, and I brought her here."

Aunt Orin was showering largess to-day, no matter how she might dole to-morrow—and this was Phil's grandchild who asked it. "We are very glad to see you, Lisbeth," she said, and her other hand went out with its mate and folded Lisbeth's thin white ones in both her own. Then she passed her across to Amsey, as she had Joan.

"I'll go one better, for this once," said he, "seeing as Orin is here for chaperon," and he bestowed a friendly kiss upon the roses on her cheeks, and a chuck to her chin.

Joan glowed with joy, and coming over beside her the two stood again shoulder to shoulder as they had at Phoebe's request, but with no silk sash for shibboleth. "Do you think we look alike?" she asked.

"Look alike! How and why should you look alike?" said Orin Wisdom.

"O, there's no reason, but do we? Phoebe said we did, and——"

"Phoebe," interjected Aunt Orin, "will say anything and everything to prove a point she wants to make. "Your hair is dressed alike, and you are of the same height, but otherwise——" her eyes giving a closer scrutiny of the stranger, "and yet you have that oval face—I seem to have seen you before somewhere."

"I was here once, with Jane," said Lisbeth, "we stopped at the door, and you came out."

"That was it. I knew I had seen you. I never forget a face," and she turned to Joan again, but while they spoke, every now and then would glance over keenly at Lisbeth who sat upon a low chair, somewhat apart from the three who were talking so eagerly together about Joan and her past.

Joan's tongue was loosed. She was another girl from the Halfway Joan. The embraces, the tender expressed affection, the evident joy and delight in her existence and her presence, had pulled out a stop never before sounded, and she hardly knew herself, so excited she felt over the adventure, so radiant in the new-found kindred and their love. Over the little simple bare story of her life she went, more full now than when first she came to Uncle Garret's, for she could fill in the gaps with information he and the Postmaster had supplied, or which she had herself recalled. From these new kindred she learned other facts; who Polly Ann was, and just why she would feel bound to care for Joan Wisdom's grandchild; who Joan's father was, a branch of the Island kin, now all extinct but herself; receiving from them also much knowledge of themselves and their life; till finally the annals were up to Halfway and its inmates, and to Phoebe the capable.

"Phoebe is a relation, isn't she?" asked Joan.

"You might say she was a bit joined up with us," said Aunt Orin.

"I refuse to admit it, right here and now and forever,"

put in Uncle Amsey fervently. "We're the 'half' branch, as the others style us, and Phoebe's a shoot off the main trunk. But I'd rather be the branch we are than the stem and gnarled roots of the real stock like Garret is, though he wasn't that set in his ways when we were young, and cronies together."

"There, there, never mind that now," said Aunt Orin. "Be thankful you don't have Phoebe to rule you and keep house for you as once you had; and let her and Garret go their ways."

But the mention of housekeeping and Phoebe had brought something to Joan's mind, and she turned to the old uncle. "Was Phoebe here, that other time when Lisbeth and I came down? It was not you——" with a glance of unconscious tribute to the stately aunt who sat upon her high chair as if upon a throne, "because I know I have never, never seen you before. But when Phoebe came to Halfway that first day, I felt as if I had seen her somewhere, and now I know, it was here, and she made us biscuits like she made up there, all kinds of shapes and sizes—don't you remember, Lisbeth, and we were kind of afraid of her, so I daren't tell her about the letter I lost?"

Lisbeth nodded. "She made them for us, too, when I was sick. Jane called them variety-cakes and Phoebe wouldn't make any more."

"But why didn't Phoebe tell me she had seen me before, and that I had been here? Would she have forgotten, maybe?"

"Not Phoebe!" said Uncle Amsey with unction; "not she! She never forgets, but she never talks, either, unless she has a mind to. She fills up with all the folks' affairs wherever she stays, but never unloads unless she thinks fit—she's inscrutable as Providence; and that close mouthed, if she chooses to be, that you couldn't get so much as a hair between her lips."

But Aunt Orin was not intent just then upon either Phoe-

be's excellencies or delinquencies. She was wondering what Joan meant by the "lost letter." And she asked her, and Joan confessed it all, as she had to Lisbeth, but it was much clearer now, being in the very house itself again.

"Was it any difference, I wonder, because you never got it," she finished, turning to the uncle, to whom the missive had been sent. "Or did anybody ever find it? Phoebe perhaps would burn it up when she would be cleaning."

"I was not back for weeks after that. It was the summer Orin had typhoid away up in Maine, and I stayed with her till autumn and she was ready to finish up her school, the last she ever taught. I never heard anything from Phoebe about a letter."

"But is there really and truly a drawer or a little place that looked like one, in the table—and O, *could* we see it and have it rolled back to show us, like that other day?"

Aunt Orin rose. How erect and fine she was, thought Joan, and not bent over a bit, for all her years.

With slow and stately bearing she crossed the room and opened a door into a lower one, down which you descended by two steps. Joan clapped her hands. "I told you so, Lisbeth, I told you so! O, I just love to be right, don't you, Aunt Orin?"

"Don't love it too well," counselled the older woman, seeing the resolute power upon the young face. "To love to be always right, ourselves, often makes us intolerant of another's claims." That resolute power within, was the *other* Wisdom strain and Aunt Orin knew its ill as well as its good effect.

The floor of the lower room was painted a bright yellow, a round braided rug adorned its centre, upon which sat a table as round, spread with a snowy cloth, with dishes upon it for the evening meal.

"We do not always 'clear away,' " she explained, "now that we are older and have less strength to spare. The girl who helps me leaves after our dinner is through. If you

are hungry we will all have some milk and cookies upon it before I clear it off, that I may not lose the effort made in spreading it. I never suffer wasted efforts; always make an effort count instead of being fruitless."

What a beautiful time it seemed to Joan as she watched the straight old form pass from closet to closet, placing upon the table the pictured plates and the high, thin glasses, the basket of cakes and the jug of creamy milk.

"O, everything is so dear and beautiful here!" she exclaimed. "O, let me come here and stay with you. I love you so——" and then she remembered Uncle Garret's words, that she was adopted, belonged to him, and to Halfway, was not free, but bound, by writing and law, and her own signed name; bound, in that big dreary Halfway with the two who did not love her, while here in this darling house were those who both loved and wanted her. Her voice caught in her throat with a sob. Aunt Orin heard it. She had not laboured all her long life with youth not to know what it meant, so young a voice to end in a sob. And she saw the two natures meeting in this child—that other older Joan, proud, resourceful, dominant—Philip, gay and joyous, craving praise and love. Which one of them was to rule? Which would steer her bark through life's perilous course?

A temptation sore it was to her own high honour to see the child at the old table, so winsome and sweet; the uplifted face—Joan's and Philip's, both. So bright and clear the fresh young voice with the cadence and the upward lilt—Phil's own. What joy it would be in their own lives to have her with them! Why should they not urge their claim and keep her. What better right had Garret? They would all three talk it over, now, and she would learn what were Halfway orders as to the Island kin, for except Amsey's mere mention of it there had been no reference as yet to the old feud.

"Lisbeth," said Aunt Orin, "you may go out around the Garden for a few minutes, while we speak of a family matter to Joan. Take the scissors from the porch, and cut some

flowers, only the blooms, not the buds, or the garden will not be gay." This with the royal courtesy, that brooked of no refusal, nor gave offence; for Joan watching quick to see if Lisbeth cared, saw that she accepted it just as it was given, going out with a gentle grace of acquiescence and a glance of frank admiration at the fine old face of the "queen of Sheba."

When the door had closed behind her, Joan hurried across and flung her arms about Aunt Orin. "Let me stay. O, let me stay!" she sobbed, clinging to her in close embrace, and weeping out her desire against that fond old heart.

Presently Aunt Orin loosed the clinging arms and lifted the tear-stained face from off her shoulder. "Sit down," she said, "and let us see what we must do. Tell us what commands you have had given you, and what you know of the old trouble."

So Joan told them what Uncle Garret had said about her coming to the Island; what she knew that Lisbeth had confided, about the bridge, and the property quarrel; but told them not of her adoption, since upon that score her lips were sealed. For anyway, thought she, with a sudden rebel tightening of her heart and will, if they do not know that, then they may possibly let me stay; and if they should, well, I would dare everything, and take whatever might happen—— "And O, won't you let me come!" she pleaded.

A silence fell within the room. Then Orin Wisdom told Joan the old story of the feud, briefly, touching only the salient features of it, necessary to account for the estrangement; Garret's anger when he found his sister had eloped with Philip, the gay half-cousin; his bitter and unreasonable wrath at his own chum and crony Amsey for helping them away; a wrath that burned hot in revengeful words and deeds while he lived on at Halfway, embittering and changing his whole spirit, smouldering through all the absent years, and breaking out afresh upon his return when they had hoped for reconciliation. The many petty tyrannies inflicted, she

did not speak of to so young a girl, only enough of the tale to point out to Joan that his bitterness was long and deep.

"He hasn't been fair," said Joan, "and I am going to stay here. You have just as much right to me as he has."

"But it is he who brought you back, has provided for you, and given you a home. We could not put in our claim above that. We have only the equal right of relationship to plead."

"O, do say I can!" urged Joan to Uncle Amsey.

"Well, we've got you by nine points of the law now, and I'm willing to chuck the balance and take the risk. But Orin has the say here," with a good-comrade glance at his stately old sister. "She's held sway so long, it doesn't seem worth while trying to break up the habit now even though she's down to only one scholar."

"Nobody rules, here," replied she, "for we are of one mind. But it is not ours to decide, it is the child herself who has the say," her clear old eyes feasting hungrily upon the bit of exquisite girlhood before her, the sole remnant beside themselves of the Island blood and the cherished brother; but reaching out and up with dominant mind far above that fleshly sway of sense and longing, within the veil where dwell honor and right, the high things of earth.

O, stern and wisely-loving Aunt Orin! How many a man and woman from out the boys and girls you taught, have looked back to that unflinching will that swerved never to "want," or "may," but ever up to "must,"—blessing you and thanking you for the power they felt within themselves to lift and conquer.

Joan felt its sway now. Her eyes rested upon one, and then the other, coming back to the old aunt sitting silent upon her chair, the pose and poise of a prophet upon her while she waited the child's decision. Then Joan's eyes left them both, and looked within, and forth upon that outward quest which was her wont, and she saw Halfway, big and drear, Uncle Garret grim and cold yet seeming to need her, Aunt Hetty with placid and patient ways whom she often might ease from

the brunt of the storms. And reaching up to Orin Wisdom's High Place she made her answer.

"I'm going back to Halfway—of course, but I *think* I'll come down often as I like, to see you. I'm coming once more, anyway, so there!" giving Aunt Orin and Uncle Amsey each an ardent hug. And then with that Island strain of her blood, that brooded not nor cherished resentment she cut loose from all the vexing thought and reverted to the lost letter.

"O, can I call in Lisbeth, and we'll help you clear the table quick, for I've got to be back and at the office when they open the mail. We just can't go till I've seen that table make itself into a chair, and find out if there truly is a place where I could have tucked away the letter."

"It might not have been anything but some word about the butter you were sent for," said Uncle Amsey. "Phoebe used to sell it while I was away, and if it was about that, why she would have destroyed it."

"Then again," said Aunt Orin with pleasant raillery of the well-loved brother, "it might have been a billet-doux for Amsey, for in the old days Polly Ann was rather sweet upon him, but smelling-salts and shawls and fan superseded sweethearts, with Polly Ann, who began to love her ailments even when we were at school together. Here you are, Joan, it is ready," as the table showed bare of dish and cloth. "Tip it gently at the spring, and it will go back itself." And the big oak sphere swung up upon its hinges, as polished beneath as above, up, and down again behind its supporting pedestal, forming a perfect chair, ample in proportions. Delightedly the two girls pushed it over the yellow floor to the wall, sitting down together upon its broad seat.

"Have you got one like it at Halfway?" asked Lisbeth of Joan.

"There is a much grander dining table at Halfway," answered Aunt Orin. "But this one was made when the house here was built, and no one has ever wished to change it. Now, Joan," and she said the name so beautifully, just like

Joan had always dreamed its sound, "get down and search for your mislaid letter."

"Of course it wouldn't be in the drawers where you keep your things," said Joan, pulling them out a bit, and peeping upon the snowy linens and bright silver within. "I don't believe there's another drawer, after all. O, yes, this might be it, this little marked off place below the lowest one, it hasn't any knobs, so it can't be to pull out."

"That is the support, I think," said Aunt Orin, judging with her eye its value and capacity. "I line the drawers afresh each month, but I do not know that I ever pulled them all out to do it."

"Phoebe would, though," interjected Amsey, "and if anything was there in her time it would have seen the light of day. Orin isn't such a sharp housekeeper as that."

"Phoebe," replied the stately old aunt, "would scrub everything inside and outside, for the mere sake of scrubbing. I wouldn't call that housekeeping. I too could keep house after that fashion, as well as Phoebe, but I wouldn't want to do so when there are such books to be read in the world, and so many who need a helping word."

The brother should have been withered, for it was said in the superior tone, that was evidently in use at the Island as well as at Halfway, and little Joan herself noticed it. But Amsey only chuckled. He and Orin were the best of friends, and her high manner, a gift from the other "half," never awed him in the least.

Joan and Lisbeth were down upon their knees before the chair. "If I had something like a knitting needle I could run it in the crack between," said Joan, "and see if it touched anything like paper—O, I do believe it does!" as she thrust in the long needle.

Uncle Amsey came to their aid with his sharp knife. Both drawers were removed, and by dint of pressing over the upper surface, the little oblong space that had looked like a secret one, actually pushed out before their astonished eyes;

not a real drawer, but support for the others, as Orin had suggested, and within the revealed aperture lay the mislaid missive, not in an envelope at all, the thin paper, several sheets of it, simply folded and turned down at one corner, and addressed to Mr. Amsey Wisdom.

Aunt Orin lifted it out. "Probably crossed and recrossed," commented she, passing it over to its owner. "Polly Ann always forgot half she was going to say till she had used up her sheets; but she had a kind heart under her ailments and her frailties, and had it not been for her, where would our little Joan have been cared for. Do you remember her very plainly, Joan?"

"No; only a little bit, but all I remember about her is nice. O, what did she say in the letter? Did it make any real difference anybody not getting it?"

"As the letter is not to us, my dear, but for your uncle, he will read it in his own time, and if there should be anything of import in it for you, we will speak of it when you come again."

Joan's face flushed, not with vexation at the rebuke but because she felt she had been misunderstood. "O, excuse me," she said, "I didn't mean to be—inquisitive. Do you think I will really be allowed to come again?"

Aunt Orin patted her small hand. "I am glad to see you understand," said she. "Curiosity dwells only within small minds. Yes, I think you will be coming, once again, at least. In the main, Garret is a just man, and when he has learned you have really seen us he possibly may alter his first command."

"Not unless he's changed his spots since morning when he had those foot-planks taken clear away," said Amsey. "Lucky for us we've a good pile of them that length on the Island, out of his reach. Silly old fool he is to nurse his spleen and cheat himself out of such fine company as Orin and me. Be sure only to come in broad day if you do come again, and I guess we'd never let you go now if we thought

you wouldn't. There's that short cut, Orin; it would be a quicker route."

But Orin Wisdom shook her head. "Let them return as they came. It is time, Joan, if you want to reach the office at the right hour. Good-bye, Lisbeth," proffering the washerwoman's girl a kindly hand and a friendly pat upon her shoulder. "Jane has done well by you to follow my instructions and keep you to yourself. You have a pretty and modest mien of your own, I see."

And then she opened wide her arms as before, and drew Joan close to her heart. "Philip's dear grandchild," she murmured. "God watch between us, and direct us in our troubled way. Good-bye, my pet."

"Not afraid to go back over the old pike, are you?" asked Uncle Amsey, bestowing upon her another of his bruin hugs, and a kiss upon the creamy cheeks.

"What have they to fear upon such an unfrequented way?" said Orin Wisdom. "Let us fear more the things that are within our hearts. It was because my little brother Phil feared not the foes within, that he failed and fell short. Good-bye," her clear old voice with its oracular note, following them like a benison as they started back over the old road.

CHAPTER XIII

A LONG LOST LETTER

WHEN they had passed out of sight of the two who watched, and the sound of their sweet young voices no longer was heard, Orin Wisdom folded away her broidery within the work-basket, closed the book she had been reading at their entrance and placed it upon its pile on the little stand.

"I must go outdoors for the rest of the day," she said. "I could not content myself inside. It is as if a rainbow had faded from a grey sky, or a bright-plumaged bird flown past. I will go out in the garden to work. The iris needs dividing."

"Wait till we go over the letter," said Amsey. "Why should those enquiries we made for the child years ago have come to naught, and Garret's search be rewarded! It beats all how he manages to succeed in getting what he's after. I'd like to see him brought low in something for once."

"Vengeance is Mine, saith the Lord," quoted the old sister.

"I know," said Amsey, "but I can't wait. I want to see it with my own eyes——" this, jocularly, with a side glance at Orin to see if he had overstepped the bounds.

But her woman's heart, loving and longing, was ruling, just now, and there was no reproof forthcoming. "Read your letter," said she, no expression of curiosity as to its contents, for it was his, and not her own, and they had been bred with a fine respect for other people's Holy of Holies—secrets, slumber, one's own pen, and the like o' that; with the same fine instinct, not even watching him as he read, but

busying her hands arranging one of the drawers of the little table, though her thoughts were far away.

"Well, well," he ejaculated several times through its persual, and finally was at the end. "Read it aloud," he said, passing it across, "I'll get the sense of it all better in the spoken words. It's Polly Cleaveland all through, poor girl; she must have felt sorry to get no answer."

Orin Wisdom spread out the thin sheets, a peep within to the inside pages. "Not crossed, I see, but a long letter, and several postscripts instead. What a fine hand she had, nobody writes like that these days," and she read aloud the missive that had been hidden away so many years.

"Dear Cousin Amsey:

For though you are a thrice removed one I think of you as much nearer, because with all my immediate family now deceased I dwell with affection upon the kindred who are left me. I came down here, obeying a long cherished desire to spend a summer amid the scenes of my childhood, but an inscrutable Providence has ruled otherwise, afflicting me with more than my wonted ills, so that I am alarmed at what may result, and feel that I must hasten back to the four walls of the room I call home.

I brought with me the little grandchild of Joan Wisdom, she who married your younger brother. Joan did not long survive him, and she left behind her in that foreign land, their child, a little girl, who by some strange means (which I shall hope to tell you if we meet) drifted back to California and was linked up with my life until her own death, leaving behind her, as did her mother before her, an orphan baby girl—Joan also by name.

I have but one room for domain, all my [illegible] er means afford, and to train up a child to [illegible] in such crowded quarters, with my poor strength, was beyond thought. So I felt guided to bring her with me, here, thinking there would be a place for her with some of her kindred. But I find

Halfway closed and Garret Wisdom in distant parts, so that hope is blasted. Debbie, who used to play with the child's grandmother in the long ago has had her heart hardened for her by Adversity, and it would thus be idle to even suggest such a charge to her, nor would they get on well together, for this small Joan the Fourth has Wisdom ways, (though our Island strain has doubtless tempered the traits unlovely that might otherwise have appeared in the ascendent—the masterful will—the pride inordinate, and love of power.

With proper surroundings she will make a splendid woman, has grace, and unusual wit of her own, even thus far along. In short, Cousin Amsey, will you take her, at the Island, you and Orin? I regret to learn of Orin's illness, but since she is no longer to conduct her school I would call it a special Providence in Joan's behalf, for Orin will now be free to take her; and to grow up in the house with Orin would in itself be a liberal education.

"I hear that you are yourself to be back to-day, and Betty by a fortunate chance wishing some extra butter, I am able to send this note to you by Joan herself, and the little girl who accompanies her. Look Joan over. I think you will find her desirable, and let me have an answer speedily as possible, for symptoms of my malady are strong upon me and the summons to return may come suddenly.

I think proper to confide to you a tale told me by her mother, who had it from her own mother's lips. Garret, as you well know, strangely turned against his sister Joan for marrying into the Half's, doubtless influencing her father to disinherit her in his will. But perhaps you do not know that he turned also against the little gipsy step-sister, the child of the gipsy girl whom his father had married in his old age. Garret got on fairly well with the wife, but the little step-sister he could not abide, a Wisdom with gipsy blood in her veins, so after the death of his father, and the wife herself, he sent the child back to her own people—the

caravan of them that often camped in the beechwoods. But it seems from the story told me, that the old Squire, in his last days, in another freak of fancy, made a will in favor of the wife and of Joan, whom he had before disowned, a secret will that Garret knew not of. In some way the gipsy managed to have Joan acquainted with this, and Joan made a journey back here to see what facts she could learn concerning it. But Halfway as now was boarded up, you and Orin were away, and she was thus shut out from both homes, so returned again to the West, disappointed in her hopes, and the old scenes knew her no more forever, for she met her death shortly afterward.

I do not know what truth there was in it, but if it were a fact, then this little Joan the Fourth would inherit Halfway over and above Garret, for I have ascertained that the step-sister, too, has passed away, long years ago. There was something about the loom-room, in the story (I think, if I remember aright, there is such a room in the old house). I hold the gipsies' belief, that nothing can keep us from what is to be ours, or good or ill, granting we give Providence a free hand to sway and lead us, so in thus passing the tale on to you I fulfil my own finite obligations concerning it.

Hoping for a favourable reply to this necessarily lengthy epistle, I am, ever and alway,

Yours with affection,

POLLY ANN CLEAVELAND.

P. S.

I have often wished to go again to the Island, to play in its garden paths, surely the sweetest since ever the world began; to trip my feet over the sunny brick paved yards and to sit in that beautiful round parlour, upstairs, that had no corners and seemed so fairylike to us who had mere square ones, upon the ground floors. The child herself knows nothing about the 'Island,' and 'Halfway,' being the family homes. She is too young for that yet, considering

there would needs be certain stories told concerning them—and I shall leave their unfolding to Providence and to Time.

P. A. C.

N. B.

When I have been forced to wander so many years in the wilderness of memories alone, it seems strange that I should be denied the Promised Land, now that my feet have just set themselves upon its borders, its golden sweets denied me—one of which was to walk down that Island road with you again, as we often walked, Dear Cousin Amsey, in the years agone, when I would be on a visit to Orin. Even then, young as I was, a long distance tired me, but you always understood me, and were kind. Now that I am grown old I am afflicted heavily with aches and pains, in back and head and heart, and the regions down below. Some people accuse me of fancying them. Why, I pray, should I desire to fancy anything so disagreeable as an ache or pain, or a spasm? If I have imagination why would I not put it to better use and imagine I have no pain at all? It is in truth an ailment real and alarming that would call me back before I set eyes upon Orin and yourself, if that needs must be. Pardon my rambling note. This is truly its end.

Polly C."

"She could have put all she really said on two pages," said Orin Wisdom, folding the thin close-written sheets. "But Polly could never condense, even in her compositions at school."

"I call it a pretty nice letter," said Amsey, "and if it had been delivered to me the time it was sent, there's no telling what might have happened. She maybe would have stayed right on here, her and Joan both. I guess she would have been willing enough."

"According to her own philosophy, then it wasn't to be, for she surely gave you a good 'finite' start in that letter. I would call it a 'special Providence,' on your behalf, the

balking of it all, for you would have been nothing but a slave to her fancies had you brought her here," said Orin. "But it is not Polly I am lamenting, it is the child, who might have been with us all these years, instead of now up at Halfway with Garret and Hetty."

"I'd like to get at the root of it all, how he got track of her and why he had her come. Maybe he's not so hard-hearted after all, Orin. He may be trying to make up for having his father disown and disinherit Joan."

"I thought you wanted vengeance upon him!"

"I did, and I still do, but you know what cronies we were, and nobody, since, ever took his place, in spite of all his ugliness. And it was the same way, with everybody else. At old 'Gorham' he'd badger and browbeat the fellows, and then suddenly turn round and show the really splendid side there was to him, and they'd forget the bullying and follow him anywhere. All that fine nature hidden away—and we two might have such good times again! Darn him, why couldn't he be like Alexander or Captain Nat, instead of the old termagant he is!"

"If you want him like them, why not be satisfied with Alec and Nat, and not hanker after Garret?" said Orin with her oracular air. "He could never have known these two girls were away together. That must have been some of Hetty's easy-going ways, to serve some turn to herself, for Garret is foolishly proud and would never let the child companion with Jane's. What a pretty face she had, though, and unusual ways for a girl of her station and rearing. Jane sets great store by her, I hear, and must have followed my counsel as to keeping her secluded, or she could never have looked so modest. How our Joan seemed to love her."

"Not much 'ours,' if she's only to be allowed down once again, and perhaps not even that! I believe I'll go up and demand her by the law," said he, in rueful reflection of what the sweet young presence would be in their lonely lives.

"We haven't any more rights than Garret has."

"But we've equal ones, and we have Joan's own desire to add to our right. He'd turn her out too, quick as he turned the others, if she ever crossed him. Wonder what there was in that story of Polly's about the will favouring the gipsy wife. I'd like to see him put out of home and Halfway himself."

"And you'd offer him one at the Island soon as he was shut out of the other."

"Maybe so, maybe so," assented Amsey. "For I never gave anybody up so lothly as I gave up Garret. But when I see that bridge down, that had taken the Island family over the creek ever since Wisdoms were around, and you kept from setting foot across, and only getting to see the folks by that twelve mile route, I feel as though I'd never rescue him even if he fell in himself and was drowning."

The old sister smiled across, a tender quizzical good-comrade smile, that he understood. "We'll have to let it all alone," said she, "do what is right ourselves, and wait the turn of events. The story of the will is only one of Polly's romantic imaginings, probably. I am going to the garden now awhile, and you can get your button put upon the door. Jennie says old Jem the gipsy is back in the beechwood. You could have got a button from him. They always had a good supply when they came, in the old days. Only Jem is left now of all the band. I suppose even gipsy-caravans are passing away in this new age of the world. We're getting old, Amsey, and out of fashion ourselves."

"Not a bit of it," said he stoutly, "leastwise not me! and if anybody but yourself said it of you I'll venture you'd let him soon see how mistaken he was! If I go across to the south meadow to-morrow I guess I'll cut over to the beech-grove and see if I find Jem. Talk about getting on in years, Jem is the one is old. He was nearly bent double five years ago. Wonder why he comes here still, now that his people are all gone."

"It's their custom. They are strongly attached to all the

spots where once they ever camped, and come back always to them as long as they are waste lands and not occupied. The caravan of them that camped there when we were young made the old grove gay with colour and life. Amsey," as a disturbing thought suddenly entered her mind—"you don't suppose those children would stray up the path that leads to where he would be. It turns right off the old road."

"Well, old Jem wouldn't harm them if they did."

"I believe that, but there might be others around, seeking their fortunes and such things. They should never have come down alone."

Amsey smiled—that crooked one that he had from his forbears, an almost wicked little curve to it upon his whimsical old face.

"Fear more the foes within," quoted he solemnly. And then he made peace with her by stroking her arm as he passed her by.

"I know, I know," he said, "we're both of us kind of losing grip of ourselves with seeing Phil's grandchild in the old home. But I'm done worrying about it, for I believe we'll come out ahead of Garret on this count, and have her here for good, sometime. I don't know when I ever went so long without a drink of water, though, and I'm off now for a fresh pail. Guess she'd be victuals and drink to us both if she came, and we'd be saved drawing and stirring." And with this pleasantry the old man went out to some duties about the place, and Orin to her garden. But to both the sky was grey and lone, for the "rainbow" had faded from it, and the "bright winged bird" had flown.

CHAPTER XIV

THE END OF A LOVELY DAY

THE two were but halfway through the old road when approaching footsteps and a whistled tune fell upon their ears.

"I suppose we'll meet everybody we know before we can get back," said Joan.

"That wouldn't be many, for me," said Lisbeth. "I know a lot about most everybody around, for Jane tells me; but I don't often see them, because since the mines opened up people use that road more, and not the post one that goes by our place. It's funny, too, sometimes I match the people up with the things Jane tells me about them, and often when I really do see them they're just as different as can be from what I'd expected."

"S-sh!" interrupted Joan, "whoever that is is just around the turn there, and it must be a man because the whistling is so loud. Are you afraid, Lisbeth? Should we run in here under the trees and hide? But Aunt Orin said nobody on this road would hurt us, so let us keep right on—O!" as the whistler rounded the curve some yards ahead. "It's only Pelig! He helps do the work at Halfway, but he's some relation and his name is Pelig, and I'm allowed to talk to him. We wont need, though, to tell him we've been at Aunt Orin's."

"Been down the Island road?" asked he as they met.

"Yes," answered Joan. "Is that where you are going?"

But Pelig shook his head in preliminary to his reply. "I'm off to see the gipsy, to get a mouse-trap out of him, if he's any on hand."

Both girls looked their surprise. "What gipsy?" asked Joan, "and where is he?"

"Old Seaforth, the last one of the crowd of them that used to come every year, Mrs. Wisdom says. They call him Jem. He's camping in the beech-grove. There's a short cut to it, branches off just below here. You didn't notice it likely, not knowing. Would you like to come along with me to see him?"

"O, wouldn't I! Don't you think we could go and just have one peep, Lisbeth? Then we could hurry back fast and get to the office in time."

"I couldn't go," said Lisbeth in reluctant refusal.

"But you said you wanted to and that you would if I would, that day I went to see you."

"I know, but when I told Jane, she said I was never to go near him, nor any of them."

"And so you wouldn't dare, then?" queried the other, not in conscious temptation, but loth herself to relinquish such a long desire when it was now within her reach.

"No, not after I'd really promised not to."

Joan gave the thin arm a loving squeeze. "I was bad to ask you twice over. I won't go now, either, but I'll ask if I can come to-morrow, if Pelig will show me the way again. Pelig, what does he look like, a real gipsy? And what does he do in the woods? Does he have a big covered waggon like the pictures of them always show?"

"Looks like himself most likely," said the youth—"and he peddles mouse-traps, and clothes-pegs, and buttons, for a living. That's what I'm after, all three. The mice are in the corn-crib, and the latch is broken on the stable door. I thought one of Jem's old buttons would hold it till we could send in to town."

"Why, that was what Uncle Amsey was doing," exclaimed Joan; "whittling out a button," and then she stopped suddenly. That was twice she had put her foot into things this day, and her face coloured with vexation.

Pelig looked his surprise and gave a curious glance at both girls. "Thought you was lame," said he to the washerwoman's girl. "I've often seen you on your crutch by the bridge. The Island house is a long way in."

Joan interposed. "We can't tell you about it now," said she, "so never mind, Pelig." And great-aunt Orin's splendid manner of dismissal was not more regal than Joan's own. "We must be going, Lisbeth."

But Pelig was not to be snubbed and sent on his way upon such short notice. Awkward and rustic youth though he was, his pulses had quickened at sight of their young faces, his fancy fed at their girlish speech, and he did not mean to relinquish them just yet. Nature upbore him and conquered his awkwardness. "That's all right," said he. "My own tongue often makes a slip. Least said is soonest mended, and you don't need to talk about it if you don't want to. But it's a fine spot, the Island house. I go there myself sometimes. It's my job to take the foot planks up and put them down again."

A head of wood and a heart of stone could not have withstood that, and Joan's was neither, so she was caught in the noose.

"Put them down again?" she queried. "Do you put them across again after you've taken them up?"

"Sure thing I do! Pull them over by Mr. Wisdom's orders, and lay them on the bank on Halfway land. Then I take them up and put them across again, by my own. And he never caught on to it till to-day, when he made me have the team haul them up in the yard where he could keep track of them. So now Mr. Amsey Wisdom and I will have to think up a new plan. There's always a way out of everything if you study it up."

Joan couldn't resist a giggle, remembering what Uncle Amsey had said about the big pile of planks at the Island. It would take a long time to get that pile up to Halfway, by way of the creek foot-bridge! It was really a very dread-

ful thing for Uncle Garret to do, and yet it was funny too, but perhaps they shouldn't talk about it before Lisbeth, an outsider.

"Isn't Aunt Orin splendid?" she said by way of turning the drift. "And such a darling house they have!"

"Halfway is better, to my mind, and Mrs. Wisdom suits me," said the boy stolidly and frankly.

"I don't see why," said Joan, "you could almost do what you wanted to all day long, at the Island, and they love anybody so, don't they, Lisbeth?"

But Lisbeth, this time, was not one with her. "I like Halfway best, too," she answered, half reluctant to disagree, but sure of her conviction—"and I'd like to stay there always and always!"

Joan was a bit discomfited, as if rebuked by the two, and then her frank outspoken heart lifted her above the hurt.

"I guess I do too, truly," said she. "It was because they were so glad to see me that I thought it was the nicest. Come Lisbeth, we must hurry up. Good-bye, Pelig," and taking her by the hand they turned away and were soon out of sight of Pelig.

"He'll tell where we've been, won't he?" asked Lisbeth.

"O, no, he won't. He's not that kind."

"But how do you know? You never asked him not to."

"I don't think I'd have to. I don't really know him much, but he looks like that, tall and strong, and that nice red head. Don't you like his red hair? I never really knew anybody before with red hair. And isn't it funny the way he pulls that lock of it that hangs over his eyes, as if it was a hat he was touching."

"His eyes are like Mr. Wisdom's. My, but his are blue ones, and so sharp they looked me straight through; and Pelig's are like them, aren't they?"

"Yes," assented Joan, "that's where he looks like the family, Aunt Hetty says. She is awfully good to him, not a bit as if he was hired, and wasn't it nice for him to speak

up for her that way and say she suited him best. That's one of the reasons I know he wouldn't tell. He's the true sort. But anyway it makes no difference if he should."

"Why, I thought from what you said that you were not allowed to go to see the Island folks."

"So I'm not. Uncle Garret asked me not to go."

"Well then are you going to tell him you were there?"

"Yes, I am. I've been thinking it over, and I shall tell him everything about it."

"But why?" asked Lisbeth. "If Pelig isn't going to tell on us there would be nobody else to know, except me, Joan, and I'd hate for you to be scolded when we've had such a lovely time together. Do you have to, Joan?"

"Yes, I have to, or else I wouldn't be the right kind of stuff."

"It's queer about the different 'kinds,' " said Lisbeth. "Pelig *won't* tell, because he's one kind, and you *will* tell because you're another. And, Joan, I don't know what kind you'd call me, but I have known all along that I would tell Jane, everything about it; for I promised her once that I'd never keep one thing back from her, so she could always trust me. And I was feeling sorry I had to, if you didn't want it known, yourself, but now it's all right. Jane won't go around talking about it though, what she calls 'blabbing.' She never does that. And I don't think she'll mind if I did go, because she likes Miss Orin, and once she told me that if anything happened to her before I was grown up that they would take me, down there, to live with them."

"O, Lisbeth! You to be living in that darling place where I'd love to be myself!" cried Joan.

"But it wouldn't be the same," explained Lisbeth, quick to hear the rueful, tender longing in the words that sprang involuntarily from Joan's heart. "For you see I'd be a helper to them, and not a real one of their family like you—and anyway I'm most grown up now, so there won't likely be the need; and I hope nothing ever happens to Jane till

I'm able to make lots and lots of money and give her a good time for all she's done for me, and——"

"Here's Pelig again," interrupted Joan. "He's whistling for us to stop. I wonder what he wants," as the tall slouching fellow approached them hurriedly, his hand as usual upon the down-hanging lock for salute.

"Forgot all about telling you that Mrs. Wisdom said if I saw you at the brook to say that Jane didn't want to be driven home, but was going somewhere on an errand, and for you," turning to the washerwoman's girl, "to go straight back to the cabin, and not wait for her at Dempsey's Corner. Almost forgot the whole thing. Guess you'll be pretty tuckered out when you do get there," and with another tug at his red lock he was gone again.

"Now you see the kind he is," said Joan. "Wasn't it nice for him not to talk any longer to us. I think I like him a lot, even if he is a boy, but of course he is some relation, anyway, and that makes a difference. O Lisbeth, now we've just got a little bit of a way longer to be together, for you'll have to go back the very shortest road and I'll have to hurry to the office, and our lovely day will be ended. But we'll perhaps have a lot more."

"I hardly dare believe it," said Lisbeth wistfully. "It's been almost too good to have over again. And I'm afraid Mr. Wisdom won't ever let you be with me again, for he looked at me so hard. I wasn't a bit afraid of him, though. I should think he would be so glad to own such a beautiful place as Halfway, and that fine room he was sitting in. If we're not allowed to have any more good times together, why we've had this one, anyway. And Joan, I think you've been so lovely to me, not a bit proud, as Jane thought you'd be. I don't ever really feel badly because I'm poor, but of course I am; and lots of girls like you who have a fine house to live in wouldn't go with me at all, and that's why I think you're so beautiful."

"I'm only poor myself," said Joan. "Halfway isn't my

own house, and I have to help work the same as you do. What's the difference whether we're poor or rich, I just know we're going to be good friends and get together somehow. I feel it in my bones—that's what Phoebe says, and I see it in my eyes. I wonder if Phoebe and Jane had a fuss, as you thought they would if Phoebe went up. That's why Aunt Hetty goes away visiting, always, on the days she comes to Halfway, to save having a row, she says. Aunt Hetty gets along so nice with everybody, though, I wouldn't think they'd quarrel even if she stayed home."

"Jane says she's too easy going."

"And Uncle Garret is too hard going," laughed Joan. "I'd like to be just between both ways."

"But you have to be just as you're made, Jane says."

"O, no, you don't," exclaimed Joan with vigour. "A teacher at the School told us we could change ourselves if we really tried to. She said if your fingers were bent you could straighten them out, and your shoulders if they were all stooped over, and so why couldn't we make ourselves straighten out *inside,* too. And I believe it, and O, Lisbeth, wouldn't I like to be straight and splendid clear through."

"But Miss Orin said that there were things 'within' to be afraid of, and she knows everything."

"Well, we'll fight them!" said Joan, "and O, here's our turn, and your Corner, and we have to leave our darling road behind. I'm awfully afraid I'll be late with the mail. Good-bye and good-bye, Lisbeth. I'm going to hug you so hard I'll crack your ribs, and you'd better look out—so there! and there!" with a fervent embrace at each exclamation. And without further lingering of their parting, the two went their separate ways, only a white flutter of hands as each disappeared around the bend.

CHAPTER XV

A GIPSY'S ENCAMPMENT

UPON the little beech-grove on the Tongue, early dusk was descending, concealing the sparse growth of what had once been a thick wood, filling the open spaces with soft shadows, and hiding from view the foot path that led in from the Island road.

Old Jem had been wandering through the countryside all the day, out into the next Settlement at the noon stretch, selling his wooden wares to the housewives, and their bits of silver jingled cheerily in his pocket—a-plenty to buy him a neck-kerchief, a pair of stout boots for the winter's tramping ahead, and some change to lay up. Food cost him but little money. With his gun he could often bring down the birds that flew from tree to tree at his approach. A rabbit now and then could be snared; and bits of bacon and pork or a loaf of bread were sometimes given instead of coin, but were never asked as dole or alms, for a gipsy scorns to beg. Nor does he steal outright. Poach, he may, from farmyard flocks if the fernfowl are scarce; pilfer, mayhap, here and there from the growing crops, potatoes from the patch and apples from the orchards, for the wild roving nature akin to the birds of the air in their freedom feels no compunction at a full bag, if caught; but he never takes for gain, nor beyond his one day's ration—to-morrow will be its own provider. If caught in the act he lies out of it if possible, or pays his fine and moves on to fresh pastures.

When first the brown-faced, free-footed people made their advent in the countryside, two score and more there were of them in the encampment, if you counted the children, and

another if you counted the ponies and the dogs. Far from the centres of population, and off the main highways, it was a wonder they found their way thither. Some knowledge must have reached them of the whitewood in the swamps for the making of their wares, of special fibre and strength; for here they tarried longer than at other sections of the country, fashioning in quantities the various commodities of their trade.

At the start the settlers did not like their coming, and especially between the Wisdoms upon their high hills, and the wanderers, was there distrust and dislike. But it was seen that they did no harm in the community, lived decently among themselves, furnishing the people with the smallware wooden necessities of housekeeping not to be purchased from stores in these early days, so the distrust subsided, and passed away, mostly. Some of the young fellows of the band often helped out in the late harvesting, and the girls in the homes. Once one of the girls stayed behind as helper at Halfway, for love of the great house, and the mistress for whom she had been named. That was years ago, when Uncle Garret and Cousin Alexander and Orin and Amsey had been young together. After the death of the mistress of Halfway, and the master of it had taken the gipsy girl for wife, the tribe came only at intervals. Some people said they were paid a handsome sum to keep away. Whether that was true or not, could not be proved, and there could easily have been other reasons. The woods had been cut down behind the beech-grove, the grove itself thinned out; there was a new, heavy license tax to pay for their brief sojourn in the municipality. Also the houses round about seemed well stocked with their articles of merchandise, since moths and rust do not corrupt a wooden vessel nor thieves break through to steal.

While Halfway was vacant, some few of them appeared each year at midsummer, for a letter that always was awaiting the head of the tribe, at the Post Office, but since Gar-

ret Wisdom had taken up his domicile here again there had been no letters, though now and then two or three of the gipsies in a single horse van would be known to have been in the neighbourhood.

This year old Seaforth, or Jem as he was more often called, had been camped in the grove but a day or so, and few had heard of his arrival. He had made but one call, as yet, and that at the Post Office, though not for mail. Passing by just as the Postmaster was locking up for night, Alexander had recognised and hailed him, jumping up on the waggon and riding on home with him, far as the oak-clump of three. It was strange too, for they had been talking of the gipsies that very morning in the office, and when George shoved along with his lock-sacks he brought word of Jem's presence in the vicinity. The news of it recalled old scenes and memories among them.

"I'd give one of these new ten dollar bills," said the Postmaster, behind his pulpit counting out his money, "one of these new tenners, and give it gladly if I could feel again the thrill that used to run down my back bone when we would hear the train of them was coming to town. Recollect it, Samuel? Garret and Amsey and I many a time have climbed the willows out on the old post-road, to watch the caravan drive in. My! 'twas a sight, to us country youngsters—a string of donkeys and ponies, with outriders ahead the big van, the tall dark-brown men driving or leading them, the women in bright shawls and gowns, the bare-legged, brown-faced youngsters. I can see them all now, plain as day."

"What I liked best was to watch them set up their encampment," said Silas. "We used to play hookey always the first few days, till teacher would hear word of their coming and get onto our excuses. To steal down from the trees and in around where they were staking off—Buffalo Bill wasn't in it for wonder—nor Coney Island!"

"You wouldn't feel that same way if you could see it all happen to-day," quoth Samuel. "It's like all the other sights

and scents and times of childhood. The strange mystery and kind of halo about them, is because they're gone forever, and can't come back again. Speaking of smells, I used to wish I could once have tasted their savory-pot that bubbled and stewed all day long over their camp fire. To sniff it cooking, off in the edge of the woods where we were, it smelled like everything you wanted, venison and birds and herbs and joints a-roast—wonder if it really was fit to eat, made up of all sorts of scraps and game; like our succotash, I guess, the more kinds of things you put in it the better it tastes and the less could you name what it really is that gives it the tang."

"Old Seaforth is showing his age, I hear," said George; "most bent double. Don't see why he'd ride here so far, alone."

"He used to be a tall, powerful looking man, and a great horse dealer; what he didn't know about horses wasn't worth telling," said the Postmaster. "I expect he had an itching to get back once more to that old waste spot under the beeches. It used to be a great place for them, foliage was almost a camp in itself without setting up canvas. It's all cut away now, behind and around it, and even the beech-wood thinned out—lumber folks don't care for beauty or sentiment, all they see in a piece of woods is so many feet of something to cut and sell. We might drive down there to-morrow," said he, "and have a look in on old Jem, as he's last of his line; eh, Samuel, will you go?"

"Sure thing, I will. The last of his line—yes, that's what he is, I reckon. And they're not good mixers into other lines. Now that girl Garret's mother took, and his father married——"

Alexander rose. "Since they are all three of them dead and gone we'll leave them and their doings in peace," said he, retiring to some work behind his "pulpit."

Samuel laughed crisply. "Always the way with you Wisdoms—never speak of your frailties but always of your fine

doings; it's a very good way, too, keeps your feet stepping high. I'll bring over my team with me to-morrow and we'll have a ride down. Have to limber up considerable, though, before we can climb those willows! We'll have our fortunes told, too, maybe!" said he.

Before the dusk had settled upon the beech-wood, old Jem had hobbled his pony for the night in the short grass at the edge of the grove, whence his cropping could be heard from the van where presently Jem himself would be tucked away. He had set his pot a-boiling over the small fire, that its contents might be simmering for the early morning meal. The savoury condiments and the pungent smoke were sharp scents upon the evening air, so that a traveller seeking the camp could easily have found it by following his nose.

Through a lane's break in the beech-wood, that led to the lake, the crescent moon and its attendant star fell full upon him with beaming brightness. Intent upon the stirring of the savoury bouillon and the feeding of the fire beneath it, his dull ears heard naught but the crop, crop of the old nag's nibble, till suddenly the dogs started up with a snarling bark that ended in a fawning whimper when a voice spoke to them from the shadowed foot-path.

He dropped his stirring paddle into the bubbling pot, as the beech limbs parted and Jane, the Skipper, came up to him. She had not on the usual hat with strings that set low over her hard, worn face, but a small shawl, tied down beneath her chin, and a larger one upon her shoulders. The heavy coal-black hair which she always wore spread over face and ears had pulled back from her forehead with the hooded shawl, and as they stood beside each other under the shadowing trees, her face, with its high cheek bones and peculiar brow revealed, was a counterpart of his own, except that his was darker and more seamed, and his coarse hair was combed forward in two short ringlets against his swart cheeks.

"Miriam!" said he. "I'm glad you came, girl, for I'm off to-morrow. You're ageing."

"Naturally," said the woman, "and why would I not, with work, and pain, and years over my head since last we met. What's your hurry away? I only heard to-day that you had come."

"I was going to see you, on my way out, after I'd been to Halfway. I saved a trinket or two of my wares to be selling you if idle folk were looking on. Thought I'd like to get a peep at the little one you took—Have you got her yet? She must be quite a girl since I was here last."

"O, she's no special to look at," said the woman; "just a girl, same as others, but she's been a good one to me, this far along. Better for you not to come around, I guess, for up to now, as far as I know, there's nobody around ever thought I belonged to the tribe. He never wanted it let out, when he was living; wasn't ashamed of us, for he had a strain of it himself, but he was that still kind, and never talked of his own affairs. I calculated I'd get down two or three times while you was here. What makes you stay so short a while?"

"There's nothing to keep me longer, when I've seen you and the Squire. The grove is no camping place now, it's thin and draughty, and the spring's all dried away; we always used to think it was almost as deep as Halfway one. What's happened it, I wonder? I've been over again and again to it but it's as dry as a bone; two matches would burn it up. Is Halfway one bubbling yet?"

"Don't ask me about Halfway! I washed there to-day, and the food and drink near choked me. I'd a reason for going or I wouldn't a gone. I could see *her,* there, though, all the time I worked, and her child."

"What was it set her face toward Halfway, always? She was never happy with us, once she tasted the life up there."

"'Twas her name, first of all, called after the mistress; and all their petting of her every time we staked here.

Don't you remember how she'd answer to none but the full name? A Polly or a Mag was a good enough call for the rest of us, but she'd have her whole or none. And in time it turned her toward their ways. When I'd be buying a shawl, or beads, or mayhap a red or yellow skirt, she'd have a hat, with a flower on it, and some of those fadey pinks or blues that gentle-folks wear. And when they asked her to stay and help nurse the mistress she was named for, she was happy as a bird, with no regret to see us start away on our year's trail—nor shed no tears for us when later on the old man took it into his head to marry her and forbade us the beech-grove. But it's not her I worry over, for she got what she hankered after. It's her baby girl I can't get over mourning about, and it's her I hate Garret Wisdom for. To turn her away from her lawful home, back on the road with us, when all her habits born and bred were gentlefolks'! It broke her heart, little thing though she was then, and she was never content amongst us. That's why she ran away from us. Jem, in your wanderings, all the years since, did you never hear aught of her and how she met her death?"

The woman was in the shadow, and she watched sharply the old man's features as she asked the sudden question. His face was in the moon's path and showed clear, but no expression of surprise showed upon his countenance, nor furtive glance of aught concealed, in the eyes he raised to answer.

"Never a word," said he, "save that in time she married a good enough fellow, though not one of us."

"Would you think she might have left any child behind her?"

"I know no more than you," he answered, "she might not even be dead, for I only got the word round about, though I'd take it that if she was living she'd ha' sought some of us out by now. In the long run a gipsy never goes back on his race, and few of them leave their people for good as she and you did."

The woman's worn dark face flushed. "My leaving was different from hers, and you know that, Jem. My man had our blood in his veins though he didn't tell it around. And I had no finer layout in the first years, than I did with you all in the vans. We lived aboard the scow that he ran down shore, moving small lumber and poling meadow hay, till we had something laid by to build the little schooner. But the wreck of that cost him his earnings and his senses, and we'd only enough left to put together the small place we built, borrowing from the Postmaster to buy the bit of land it sets on. I didn't want to come back here, myself, but he set his heart upon it; and a little wit or none, it's hard to turn a man from his will. Anyhow it's no use trying to cheat ourselves out of what's to come to us, you know that; wherever we go, what's coming to us will follow us. So I made no more fuss, and cared for him well till he died. For all I know nobody around puts me down for what I am, unless it's Phoebe Shields. I mistrust she's wise about it, though she's never said aught to me. If she's not, then it's the only thing she doesn't know, around these parts."

"Phoebe hasn't ever married, then, I take it, if her name is still Shields. Remember how she used to ride the ponies when she wasn't knee high to me? We taught her the whisper that 'ud make them run, and she'd stand tip-toe to their ears to say it, and hang on after lots of the boys 'ud drop off—all kinds of courage she had. She was a young un when us all was grown up. I'd think she'd ha' ben a good sort."

"She is, but she rubs me the wrong way, somehow, doesn't stroke from head to tail. She runs most of the houses hereabout. I couldn't wash the woollens at Halfway to-day but she comes to spy out how I was doing it, and so I left with the day only three-quarters worked out, but Mrs. Wisdom paid full price, with fresh butter and eggs beside, for our breakfast, and a pot of jam too. She's got a full pocket but she gives out of it with both hands, I'll say that for her,

though I've no love for anybody who calls Halfway 'home.' And Jem, I've brought it to you, and a loaf beside that I walked away home to get, of my own baking," said she drawing a basket from under her shawl.

"Take it, basket and all. We've got enough at home, and I'd like to think of you having them fresh and good. There's a new kerchief too, and a couple of pairs of socks that were my man's, never worn, and why should I keep them longer when they'd do you a good turn in the winter that's coming."

"I'll take them glad, and thank you," said he, reaching across for the basket. "I'd never anything against your man, for he treated you well I've always heard; and as for some of it being Halfway stuff, I've no objection to that either; fresh butter and eggs sounds good to me, girl, even if it does come from the Squire's providing. I haven't the hatred you have for them, though I've no love."

"You're a man, and wouldn't feel it as I did, anyway, and then she was only cousin to you, and sister to me, so I'm the one to hold it. He's wanted my land ever since he came back to Halfway, because it was in the old holdings, offered me a big price too, but he'll never have it from my hands. I took all my savings and the little that was on my man's life, and paid off the Postmaster, so it would be mine outright. That's why I have to wash and work for my living as I do of late."

"But the girl you took must be a help by now, or is she a no good sort and a stone about your neck?"

Quick the woman peered out to watch him, as he said it. But it was apparently only a careless remark, and she leaned back again against the tree when she answered. "The girl is half lame, and frail, but as smart with her head as they make them. She took all the schooling that can be got here, in half-days, and can read and talk like a school mistress herself. I don't know what I'd have done without her for company all these years. I'm getting on, Jem, you were

right when you said I was ageing, though no woman likes to be told it, truth or not. I pass terrible nights, and in some one of the bad spells I'll go off, I know that. Jem, if you've a dish handy give me a helping of the savoury. The smell of it takes me back to the old life. It was long days ago, long days, and you and I are getting pretty near the end of the lane, Jem."

"Yes, I think of it myself, often, o' late years, since I'm alone, and I go over the old times we used to pass in caravan and camp when we were a crowd of us. When you came up I was thinking back how Mammy would tie a coat 'tween two trees, pin us up 'twixt tail and collar, and swing us asleep. Can you hark back to the tune o' it—I couldn't get it for a long spell, but some of it's come to me, broken like.

"Sweet fields beyond the swelling flood
"Stand decked in living green—
. . . . . .
"And Jordan rolls between."

"A camp meeting ditty she got hold of somewhere. It just used to rock us off—the Jordan rolling between. Did you ever keep it in mind, Miriam?"

"I hadn't, it had all gone from me, but I'll be hearing it from now on, and maybe it'll help me through the spells."

"The Postmaster, he said I was looking old, myself. He's the only one I dropped in to see around the Corner, just as he was winding up for night, and he hopped up on my old waggon beside me and let me drive him home. See what he give me, I never had the like in all my life!" and he pulled from inside his blue shirt a new crisp ten dollar bill.

"Jem! All that much money! And he gave it to you outright!"

"You didn't think I pinched him for it, did you? If it had a' been the other old cove, up at Halfway, it wouldn't

have been a crime maybe, but I've another and a better way o' getting it out o' him!

"I hope you do. But the Postmaster he's one of God's men, if such folks be."

"Yes, he's all right, and he seems to think by what he tried to preach to me, that all of us is God's men; but if it's true, there's an awful grist of us hasn't been told it, and have thought we was cut out by another pattern. I've never troubled about such things, much, because all I can do mostly is to keep each day a-going; but along lately, especially nights like this when I'm dead fagged out, I don't know but I'd like to believe I could creep in under cover o' the Big Tent, at the end."

"Why don't you go back to some of the boys, where it would be warmer, and easier living, with winter coming on? Some of them would give you a keeping free enough."

"I'm thinking of that, but they're working at trades now, and not living as I've always done, and I'd smother to be shut up in a house day and night, after the open sky and the long trail. I'll get on all right. Garret Wisdom 'ill give me enough to keep me on Easy-Street for a spell. I'm to see him as I go off to-morrow. What would he do if he knew it was a gipsy who was keeping him from buying your place? He hates the whole of the tribe."

"He couldn't do worse than he has done. I got a sight of him to-day through a window and nobody any the wiser. He was sitting before a hearth fire, this hot day, drinking, dipper after dipper of water. I never saw the like of the quantity he took down him. Handsome as a clock he is, too, outside; it's inside he's ugly, brimming up with bad temper and avarice, and maybe remorse for sending that little one off from the home where she was born. I hear the 'thirst' is so heavy upon him that he well-nigh loses his reason if the water's not to hand all the time. I wanted to ask you about that, Jem, I've been so long away from my people. Do you

recollect what first started it all, and how the curse ran—there's a rhyme or some such thing about it."

"Sons' sons and daughters' sons—
But son's son shall end it—"

repeated the old man. "I don't know as I can tell you much about it myself, old Mammy knew the whole story. I guess one of the family, way back in war times in the States got mad at a bunch of us and wouldn't give a drink to a dying man, and old Mag, you've heard Mammy tell how she was a kind of a Queen among us, well she put the 'curse' on them, vine and branch, wherever they'd be, that the men of the race should never get enough to drink, always be craving it, and dying terrible deaths from lack of it in deserts, and fevers and wars and that like. I'm glad it's struck him hard. Reckon that's what brought the first lot of us away down here when the Wisdoms first settled—we lay out to follow them up to see how it works out."

"But did you never hear of their women-folk having it?" asked his companion eagerly.

"They wasn't included at the start. I've heard, though, of some of their women folk being touched with it, but I'd think that was mostly because they'd heard about it and kind of fell to the habit unconscious like. They don't need to have it, for the curse was only on their men."

"I wonder what it means about 'ending' it. Hope it doesn't end as long as Garret lives."

"There's not many of the sons' sons left, around here, near as I can reckon, but there was a likely fellow of them to see me to-day, the Hardscrabble lot, working up at Halfway he tells me. He's no fool, and he's going to get on in the world in spite of his Hardscrabble luck. He'd only known of the thirst awhile back, and he asked me about it, for it's beginning to get a hold on him. I told him to forget it and cut it out if he could, and I gave him a charm that maybe'll

help. He laughed, but he didn't mock at it. I'd hate to see him hounded by it, for I took a great liking to him—head as red and bushy as old Jock's was, his grandfather—an old man when I was a youngster. His thirst went to rum, and took him off, at last."

There fell a silence in the beech-wood. The flickering flames were dying down in the small fire, their blue smoke scarce perceptible. The slender moon and its attendant star dropping toward the horizon down the lane's clearing, as though the pathway clove the heavens, above the tracery of the tree-tops.

"Well," said the woman, rising from where she had been seated to eat her savoury mess. "I must go on, night is upon us. I don't know when I've walked as much as I have to-day, and I'm all in. I'd a trip to the grave yard beside all else, finishing up a job I'd on hand there. The Wisdoms are going to get a jolt next time they go burying again. I hope Garret sees it before he's under the sod himself. Good night, Jem. Perhaps you better not call round, now that I've seen you. It's done me good though, to talk with you, and I hope you get into snug quarters before snow flies. A gipsy can always find a corner to settle in. Good-bye. *Kushto bak.*" And she was gone from out the beech-grove, so sparse and open now to what its sheltering canopy had been in the old days.

The dogs that followed her quietly to the road came as quietly back, sniffing at the empty dish upon the ground that she had been eating from. The old man poured some of the pot's contents within and set it out for them, closing the lid tight again that it might still simmer in its heat; covered carefully the fire that some warmth of ashes or perhaps ember and brand might be left for the morn's resuscitation. And hearing the pony still cropping safely near, he clambered up into the waggon, settled baskets and boxes, spread his canvas bags of straw for pallet and pillow, and lay down to rest. The van with its faded red roof was straight in

the broad lane's track down which the moon was still passing in stately procession with its glowing star, their lights effulgent full upon his old tired face. And he watched them, till they dropped from sight, night's soft enveloping darkness falling upon the beech grove. Then his old seamed face took on a child's guise; the coarse ringlets upon his swart cheeks seemed silken tendrils that a mother would kiss as she tied him in his cradle coat to swing betwen the saplings.

"Sweet fields beyond the — — —
"Stand decked — — —"

He had forgotten some of the words again, but he knew the beat of the rhythm—

"While Jordan rolls between—
"While — — — between."

And so till the weary brain registered nor word nor beat to his heart's longing, his Mammy rocked him asleep as of old.

CHAPTER XVI

SWEET FIELDS BEYOND

WHEN Jane, the Skipper, reached her Cabin home that evening Lisbeth was already a-bed in her berth like bunk, but was not yet asleep. Spread upon the table shelf was an appetizing looking meal, and the kettle was steaming upon the stove.

"Looks homey and good," she remarked, closing and bolting the cabin door. "But I don't know as you should have burned up wood to keep a fire all this time. It takes a deal of it the year through, having the house running just the same while I'm away."

It was not at all what she would have said, had she stopped to think, but worn out with her work and the two long tramps, and all unstrung with this and the interview with Jem; besides, she had slipped her weariness and her worries over onto the first thing that suggested additional anxiety.

Lisbeth burst into tears. She also had been strained and overwrought, with her own day's doings and with waiting so long for Jane's return. "That's all I am to you, I know," she said, "just an expense and a care. But I haven't got anywhere else to go, and nobody else to love, and she, Joan, has got so many people! I can go out to work, though, Miriam. I'm big enough for that now, and I should have thought of it long before."

But the woman cut her short. "Hush," said she, conscience stricken to see the effect of her hasty and not really ill meant words. "I didn't stop to think how it would sound. What's a few sticks of wood compared to the company that you've been to me all these years! And how would I ever have been

able to keep up my work if I didn't know there would be a fire humming and a hot dish of tea waiting me when I got back." And then suddenly she dropped down beside the bunk and lifting the girl's head from the pillow strained her close against her hard worn face. "Poor dear little thing," she murmured half to herself, "poor dear little thing. Dry up your tears and forget I said it."

"I've forgotten it already," said Lisbeth, smiles chasing the tears. "And it's worth it, anyway, to get such a good hug as that. O, Miriam, I want to tell you all about to-day—and I'm going to get up and pour you your tea."

"No, stay where you be. I'll have what I want to eat bye and bye, when I'm rested a bit. I'm too fagged for it now. Is it your leg ailing again?" noting the tired look on the girl's face and the updrawn knee that betokened a seeking for easy posture. "Too long a walk it was for you. I felt that, but you would hear nothing against it. We must get some more liniment, and go see the doctor now, instead of waiting to earn the money first. It's maybe getting worse all the while and past help. We'll go tomorrow, Lisbeth. I know a chance we can get for going down, and we'll risk one coming back. Then sometime we'll get to see that one you remember at the Poorhouse; knowing you when you was little he'll maybe be better able to sense what's the real trouble. You haven't forgot his name, have you? It always leaves me just when I want to say it."

"O, no, I'm sure I'll always know it, and anyway, I wrote it down for you, don't you remember, and you put the paper in your chest."

"So I did. I'd forgot that too. Never let anybody but yourself and Miss Orin touch the chest, Lisbeth, if aught should happen to me. There's nothing worth while inside, but I've always had it and I don't want strangers mocking over the little keepsakes and notions I've saved up. My, that's a good sup of tea," she said, pouring out a cupful

from the pot upon the hearth. "There's nothing like it for cheer and comfort. I'll take the food later on."

"And now I'll tell you about to-day."

"No, not now, the morning will do, for I'm that fagged I couldn't properly enjoy it, and then your telling will be spoiled. We've all to-morrow ahead. I'll just turn in awhile without undressing and you can keep the first watch. Then I'll roll out and get off my clothes and have a good long sleep, a late one too, and you can be all hands on deck in the morning," said she, in light tone, to offset the disappointment upon the young face, and her own weariness as well.

"O Miriam, I love to hear you talk like that," said Lisbeth, the disappointed look vanishing. "It seems like a real vessel now, and the wind's coming up, so we'll pretend we're truly off on a cruise. Who'll we have on the look-out, when we both get asleep? Would we have the Lord, Miriam?"

"I don't know much about Him," said the woman, wearily, "except that He made me, and likes us all to walk a straight path and keep the laws of stone, as your Granny Squires called them. I don't know though as He'd be free to bother being on the look-out for such as us. He's bigger affairs and finer folks to be taking heed of. I never heard you say aught about it before, and we've had the cabin nigh shake off its rocks many a night. Who put that notion into your head?"

"It's Joan, she talks about Him, and she prays to Him every night to watch her. Somebody she calls Polly Ann told her how, when she was just a weenty-teenty, and she hasn't ever forgotten one single night, because before she came here she hadn't anybody really her own to look after her and so she had to have somebody to care, she says, or dear knows what would have become of her. And I thought that it would be nice to have some one on the look-out for us too, not only in the pretending that we are on a vessel, but for always, Miriam. I should think that's what He'd be for, people

like us. Joan is so beautiful, and she thinks of the nicest things to do."

"As for being beautiful, I know a girl that suits me far better than she does, looks and everything. But somebody needs to pray to Him up at Halfway, that's sure. And maybe it might be good for us too, so you can ask Him if you want to and know how, for the wind is beginning to whistle around and does sound lonesome. Good-night." But as she passed Lisbeth's bunk on her way to her own she saw upon the locker beside it a cup of water. "We're going to cut that right out, from now on," said she sharply, emptying its contents and hanging the cup upon a hook. "I want you to promise me that you'll stop it."

"I'll promise if you say so, but O, I'll be so thirsty if it's not there! and you did it for me yourself, Miriam, first, and I've got so used to it now that I don't know whether I could go to sleep without it. I only got it, to-night, because you were so late, and I thought I was getting too old, anyway, for you to be waiting on me, and that I could do it myself, after this."

"We won't get it at all, either of us. It's a bad habit to be fastened upon you."

"Joan does it. She takes it upstairs herself, and Mr. Wisdom has a whole jug filled every night, close to his bed, and he drinks it every drop, Joan says. She has to fetch and carry it up from the spring, ever so many times a day, and she says that Mrs. Wisdom told her all his family were thirsty people. What makes them be that way, Miriam?"

The woman's face darkened with an unspoken thought. "He maybe can't escape his," said she, "but you've no call to feel it, no matter what that other girl does. It's just growing into a habit with you and the more you drink, the more you want to, water or what not. Now go to sleep and forget all about it. And since we're both rather strung up we'll have a lay in for once, good and late. Remember now, not to get astir early. I don't know when I've been so dead beat out."

So, inside the small cabin, while the wind whistled without, and the look-out watch kept the hours, the two slept—the woman's last thought as she turned over the day's events, that *Garret Wisdom should not know what she knew—not for awhile at least, till she could study out the best move.*

Long before the mail carriers had gathered next day, there was most unexpected news brought to the office. Jane, the Skipper, had been found dead in her bunk-like bed, by Lisbeth, when she went to wake her, dressed as she had crawled in so weary the night before, not rousing as she had thought to, for disrobing, but sleeping on, deeply, till sometime in the hours her soul had fled the clay. Blessed was it for Jane that they had set up a look-out watch that night, One who would not suffer the escaping soul to be lost—since, simple creed though it was, she had recognized that her Maker was God and that He likes us all to walk in a straight path and keep His laws.

It caused great excitement in the small Settlement. On every hand the kindly people proffered aid and comfort to the girl thus suddenly bereaved, offering her shelter under their own roof-tree; not knowing until informed by Lisbeth herself, that according to the dead woman's desires and plans, she was to close the small cabin and take up her abode with Orin and Amsey Wisdom, until she should be of age and free to choose her own abiding place.

Before this piece of news was an hour old, a second death was announced. The hobbled pony of the gipsy, cropping away on his long pasture, had strayed two or more miles beyond the beechwood. Some boys from down the river, on their way from school, hearing its whinnying call, recognised it, and leading it back to tie it to the van, found within the waggon the still and prostrate form of old Jem, rigid in death. No trace of violence was upon his person, nor track of intruder within the grove. The waggon's contents had not been disturbed; in his pockets was some small change;

and upon his breast inside his old blue shirt was spread a crisp ten dollar bank note.

Captain Nat was Coroner for the District, and he stopped at the office on his way back from the grove where he had held the inquest, relating all the particulars of the findings.

"Looked for all the world like a baby asleep in his crib," said he, "kind of a smile on his face and his old hands tucked up under his chin—you couldn't have made up a truer verdict than the one we gave him: 'died a natural death;' and it seems a pity so many of us have to go in any other way."

"That's exactly my opinion," said Silas. "People make such an outcry about a death like that, when to my mind it was the way God and Nature intended—just like the leaves dropping off when they're good and ripe. We've got so kind of used to disease and horrors carrying us away, that we think it's this other kind is queer. But it sure was strange to have two go the same way, the same day, though the doctor said in Jane's case it was her heart, and a wonder she hadn't gone in some of the other spells she had. She had talked to him about them only a little while ago. Kind of strangers too, they both were, amongst us, no kin with anybody around."

"Now we'll have to have a third, I suppose," interposed Samuel. "Always three deaths, and three fires, in a run. Wonder who'll it be. I've always seen it come out that way. And old Seaforth had a tenner on him, did he? That's strange too," in a ruminating tone and a look askance at Alexander. "He only has small wares left to sell these days, no horse bargains like he used to make profit on. Wonder who he held up for that ten."

And the Postmaster, to clear the dead name of dishonour, was forced to confess his bestowal of the same. "Since he can't get back to speak out for himself," said he, "that's the only reason I'm telling, though I'm not ashamed of it." And the smile that went round among them in the office was a smile of understanding comradeship and approbation, for

one way and another a good many of the Postmaster's "tenners" were scattered about in the course of every year, usually to somebody whom no one else would help.

"That's the solemn part of a sudden death," said Silas, "that we can't even get back to square ourselves with the world, have to die on our past record, and no changing or righting it."

"Nattie's the only one who ever had that chance," said Samuel. "Remember that time the notice of his death was in the papers—what did you think, when you read it, Nat?"

"I knew 'twas a lie the minute I saw it," averred Captain Nat, solemnly, and in the hearty guffaw that followed, he made his departure. "Have to see the doctor again," said he, "and drive way to the mines for him where he's on a case. See you to-morrow, Alec, suppose between us we'll have to arrange about the burying. Every parson on the circuit's off on vacation, or something or other, so you may have to read the service over him yourself. Good-day, boys."

"What a silly you are," said Louisa the next evening, bustling around to spread for Alexander a much belated supper. "I heard about it, giving him all that money, and then having it buried with him! What a silly!" but the tone of the words had a caressing sound that stole away their sharpness, and Alexander was not hurt.

"Well, would you rather have me a knave or a fool?"

"Seems like trying to buy his way in, as if you thought money would do what he didn't do for himself!" said she.

"O, there's many a worse than Jem has got by Peter at the Gate without a ten dollar bill, Louisa; 'whosoever will may come,' even at the very last breath."

"I never approve that doctrine, Alexander. It's comforting to us frail mortals but it's not reasonable."

"But you and I wouldn't shut out one of our children

from home at the end of his life even if he'd wandered far and erred."

"That's specious arguing," said Louisa, "and might do harm if you spread it around among easy-living folks."

Alexander laughed softly. "Specious," repeated he; "specious, where did you get that word?" and he laughed again.

"It's a right enough word, isn't it? And you notice I know how to use it," quoth she with spirit.

"I noticed," said Alexander, peering out over his glasses upon her, "and I wasn't laughing at you, but at something I remembered against myself. When I was first preaching I got up a fine sermon one day, that I had to preach before the President of the Conference, and it had your new word in it, and another of its ilk, and I was pretty proud of them both, for like you I had got them in in a right place. But the President came to me afterwards. 'What do you know about *specious?*' said he. 'Let the words of your mouth and the meditation of your heart be in plain common language, young man,' said he. And I was cast down about it, for a spell, then I concluded not to follow his orders. A Master of the Queen's English himself what did he want to stunt me for, at the start! It was just an arrogant little way he had, sometimes, though a true man of God, and so I took my own head for it and got all the words I chose, for my own, but I never could make myself use that one I'd been called down on; and hearing you speak it, so assured, made me laugh, remembering. It's a very proper word, Louisa, and you placed it well." Alexander got an extra piece of pie for that.

"I like it, though, that you buried them both in our lot," said Louisa, "even if you didn't ask for my consent."

"I counted on it, without asking, since there wasn't opportunity to speak with you. I had worried considerably over it, all the forenoon. Plans were made to have them placed in the new land we'd taken over, kind of on the outskirts, you know, off from the rest of us, and it made me think of outer dark-

ness and gnashing of teeth and all that. As neither of them had a fair chance to say where or how they'd have liked to be put away, it looked like taking advantage of them to shove them off in the Potter's Field, so I decided we'd plenty of room in our own lot for them both—only ourselves and maybe the two boys to come back to it. And I'm glad I did it, no matter what anybody else thought of it. As for the money, well, that may have been a bit silly, Louisa, but it touched me to find it spread out on Jem's heart under his old worn shirt, and I remember that when I gave it to him he said he'd never had one in his life before, 'twould have seemed like robbing him to take it away. And to fix it so he wouldn't need to be buried by the parish, Louisa, I bought in his old pony and waggon, and there'll be enough out of that to put up a stone for him, beside. A man to work all his life and then have to be buried by charity just because he didn't happen to have enough laid by for it at the time, didn't seem fair and square. I bought the whole outfit."

Louisa turned full upon him with a look that needed no interpretation of speech.

"Yes, I did," said he stoutly. "It's out in the old waggon-house now, I towed it back with me, that's why I waited so late, till after dark, so you wouldn't see it till I had explained."

"You'll have a hurdy-gurdy and a monkey, soon, and be out on the open road yourself."

"Well, I've always hankered for all three, ever since I was a youngster, and I'm sure old enough to have them now if ever I'm going to be," chuckled he. "Eh, Louisa?" as the consternation faded from her sweet placid face at the boyish longing note in his voice. "There's plenty of pasture for the old nag, and room and to spare for the van, and maybe we'll have a ride in it some day. When the boys come back next leave I expect they'll think I've lost my senses, but I did crave that old red-covered van."

"I'd like to see them dare to criticise your doings," cham-

pioned she, "but they wouldn't want to, for everything you do pleases them. I tell them how you scatter your money round—poor folks' doctor bills paid off, a cow here and horse there to a man who loses one, and a boy off to college and so on and so on—there'll never be any end to them. And they say 'good old Dad, good old Dad,' after every story."

"I've three of you to count on, then," said he. "I'm glad the boys don't think I should hoard it up for them; they're their mother's boys all right, and trained after your own heart and ways, Louisa."

"I guess you had a hand in the training."

"Not much. There wasn't any need for help as far as ever I could hear."

"Well, you always acquiesced," averred she.

"We'll have to get the President of the Conference after you, Louisa. That's another unusual word, but a pat one all right, and a bull's eye in the placing of it. I didn't know you had knowledge like that tucked away."

"There are a good many things tucked away that you don't know of."

"But forty-five years together, Louisa."

"I knew you, out and out, the first year through," averred she, "but it would take twice forty-five for a man to find out all that's hid away in a woman's head and heart, so you can just go right on looking for surprises, to the end, Alexander. And as for throwing away your money on all kinds of fool people, it's your one extravagance, and you've a right to be humoured in it, I suppose, since you're too old to be diverted from the error of your ways." And then she turned with a sudden thought. "Who paid the funeral expenses for Jane?"

Alexander had a trick of dropping his glasses when not needed for minute inspection, part way down his long nose where a hump kept them in safety. It was easier than hunting round for them and putting them on for every occasion, but it lent an odd appearance to his fine old face, as though

four eyes were looking out from it. He had been beaming upon his spouse with his own two, as she talked, and now at her sudden question winked one of them knowingly, for answer, still beaming and assured.

"I thought as much," said she. "A new suit throughout, to his skin, for old Seaforth, the best hearse and coffin, with a stone beside! And the same for Jane-the-Skipper, I suppose, even if she hadn't a mule and van for sale!"

"You're correct in your surmise, as per usual," defended he valiantly, "and would have done the very like yourself, too. As for Jane, the Skipper, I've a kind of legal right to look after her, as I fixed up her mortgage, and made the place over to the girl, a few years ago, so I don't begrudge giving her a funeral, nor a stone later on. The girl is a true mourner. It's a wonderful thing she's got a home at the Island with Orin and Amsey. She couldn't stay on at the Cabin there alone. I've promised her I'll take her in to town next time you and I go, to see Dr. Zebra about her lame knee. We might be able to get her into the hospital for treatment. You could speak to Orin about it."

"Counting on me again, I see."

"As I always can and do, though by your speech you blow hot and cold sometimes to egg me on. I've been prospered more than I deserve, and it's not for 'keeps,' but to pass along to those who haven't got the knack of making it themselves. Stewards we are for the Giver of it all. What's that old hymn, Louisa? *'Since from His bounties I receive'*—'twas father's favorite. Remember how he'd sing it clear to the end, sitting before the old Franklyn, beating the time with his hands, upon the chair arms? We'll sing it at worship tonight. I hadn't thought of it for quite a spell, eh, Louisa?"

So before they went up to their chamber that night, when they had read and prayed, the two voices took up the old refrain, all the verses through—Louisa's high sweet treble and Alexander's deep bass, their hearts singing with their voices, and all the deeds of their days as well—

"Since from His bounties I receive
Such gifts of love divine
Had I a thousand hearts to give
Lord, they shall all be Thine,
Lord, they shall all be Thine."

But later on when their heads were upon their pillows, and the steady stentorious breathing arising therefrom betokened that the placid Louisa was not only past the borderlands of slumber but well-nigh into the interior of that delectable bourne, Alexander by a solid nudge summoned her back to earth and its problems.

"I've been thinking over about old Jem, and Jane and that girl of hers," said he musingly, "and I'm wondering if I'd better tell you something that Nat and I are ferreting out, but of course you wouldn't speak of it to anybody——"

"If it's the kind of a secret that I'm to keep to myself, then don't tell me," said she, "for I'm chuck full now of that sort; everybody tells me their troubles, and why they think I won't let them out again I'm sure I don't know. The fusses I could make if I told their tales back to the people concerned!"

"O, well, this one will keep awhile. It's not a real fact yet, anyway. I was just turning it over and surmising about it."

"And wasting half your night's sleep over it! I took you for better or for worse, but if I had known before hand that way you have of pondering over things, and talking at night time, I never would have 'took' you at all!"

"You know you *would have* me, Louisa, bad habits or good!"

"Would have you!" with a sniff unmistakable, though muffled somewhat by the pillow; for Louisa had turned over upon it again and was already approaching her slumberland. "*Would have you!* Well, that's the worst yet!"

"I'll go down first chance I can get off, and talk it over with Orin, she's a wonderfully wise woman."

"Far too wise to ever marry, either way you take it. She'd have set you up on a stool with a dunce-cap on three times a day, instead of you having the say in everything as you do now." This not with acrimony, but drowsily, for untrammelled by an extra secret and its disturbing thought, Louisa could make fleet progress toward her desired haven. "We'll be as stupid as owls in the morning, and I've muffins set for breakfast, the kind you like, Alexander. So, go to sleep—Silly," said she.

The casual remark about the muffins was a husher, and Alexander smiling tenderly in the dark at her shrewdness did not further detain her, for if they two should be late in their waking up, those muffins would be set aside till dinner time. Alexander knew it, and he did love those crispy golden popovers with his morning coffee,—which proved that Louisa in her own way was as wise as Orin, and that she truly, as she had before-time averred, knew Alexander out and out.

So Alexander pondered no further, and himself fell asleep.

CHAPTER XVII

THE GAY CAR OF PLEASURE

LIFE in a community does not cling long round memories of death in its midst, whether those taken are prominent in affairs or lowly of station. Often close upon the heels of the funeral equipage follows the gay car of Pleasure, a seeming disregard but arising in truth from the emotions born of death's passing, as though to say "who knows when our turn will come, let us happy be, and while we may enjoy enjoy to-day, for the hour cometh when no man shall work—nor play."

So the thin church-yard grass about the two new graves in Alexander's lot had not yet risen again from its trampling, when Aunt Hetty, apprehensive that something might occur to frustrate her own long cherished desire if further postponed, made known to Joan that the party was to come off, that her list was made out, and the day thereof set.

It was to be none of your hastily gotten up affairs, summoned of a morn or a midday of the "soirée" itself, with other calls to bakers and fruiterers or a caterer in lieu of either, with scarce a flutter of preparation or expectation; but the good old-fashioned kind of a party where a full week's preliminaries preceded even the invitations, and another followed after the summoning; where nothing could be "ordered" but staples, and all else must be manufactured or concocted within the house whence you were bidden.

Joan felt nigh to bursting with the sheer joy of anticipation, her one and only fly in the precious ointment (and there always is that one at least, no matter how well strained or stirred the unguent, for even the "apostle-preparation" hints

by its name at the Judas within), the sole disturber of her peace being that she had been forbidden to go again to the lovely Island home.

Quite unconcernedly, far as outward donned indifference was concerned, she had gone direct to the wing rooms on her return that day, and told the story of her going thither—a straightforward tale that withheld nothing. Uncle Garret could see that, accustomed as he was to detecting snags and vulnerable points in an opponent's argument. He heard it through, without comment, so that the culprit feeling somewhat sustained thereat in her misdemeanour, even ventured upon the simple request at its close that she might be allowed to visit there again as often as she liked.

There was no equivocation whatever in his answer and he said it in few words, then dismissed her from his presence, for the time being. She was not to go again to the Island; nor to hold communication with them; not even to speak of them again to him until such time as he might himself see fit. The previous mandate had been more in the nature of instruction and admonition. This present utterance was a command, and Joan felt its force. But it was a hard injunction to be bound by, for the Island inmates now included Lisbeth as well as the beloved Uncle and Aunt, and Lisbeth was the only girl she knew in all the Settlement.

Whether or not Uncle Garret was aware of Lisbeth's presence there, Joan did not know, nor did she ask, since his dictum precluded questioning. But Uncle Garret knew it assuredly. What was the use of having "ears all down your neck" if you couldn't hear a simple piece of news like that! And it was really the main motive for alteration of his former decree—that, and the fact that she had actually dared go against his expressed wish. For why should he allow his adopted daughter to visit with a poorhouse chit such as Lisbeth was! He knew how to draw the proper line, as the Island folk never had! And arms interlocked, as he had noted when the girl was at Halfway that day—it must never

happen again! A bold girl she would be, doubtless, with those red cheeks. And then he remembered the black shadowy eyes and their deep look into his own as she stood in the doorway. It gave him a disquieting thought. And he made a memo upon a bit of paper and tucked it within a drawer of his desk, reaching down presently into a little cabinet part and lifting up one after the other a pile of old pictures within, but evidently not finding what he sought, closing and locking it again!

All this, while Joan went to the spring for his fresh water. She would come back sulky, he supposed, still she must be taught to obey him, and to discriminate properly as to her position and companions. But Joan had it all thought out when she returned, and no tone nor expression was marred by resentment. Down deep within her was something that was like the spring itself, a "never say die" spirit, its source back in the well-spring of all her ancestors, the Island as well as the Halfway branch. A fount of never-ending strength and refreshment it would be to her as the years went on. Just now she drew from out it, though unconscious of its existence, remembering what Pelig had said "that there was always a way to get around things—" that it was true, too, for hadn't there come a way, without her even guessing it, for her to get to the Island the first time! "And I'll bet you there'll be another!" said she, though there wasn't a soul in sight to take it up. "I'll wait till after the party, but I can't wait much longer, for I've just got to see those darling people again!"

So thoughts of the party took the edge off her troubled disappointment, and instead of sulking she returned with the water in good spirits, really rather glad of the dismissal from immediate attendance in the wing rooms, because it gave her a chance to seek out Aunt Hetty to question her about the approaching festivity.

O, what a week it was at Halfway, even though things had to be done surreptitiously lest the gruff master should

get knowledge of it and not only refuse to be host but forbid the guests as well. He would be equal to both, uncivil though it might be, and nobody knew it better than Aunt Hetty herself whose special party it was, the long desire of her heart ever since she had entered the great doors and become mistress under its broad roof. But Aunt Hetty's "Providence" that had helped her through so many difficulties, even to schooling her as how properly to manage husbands by giving her three, when most wives have to stumble along and fail in finesse with one, the "Providence" which to Aunt Hetty did not presume upon attributes of Deity but was rather a kind of luck or opportunity of which you could speak glibly as of a mortal, this special mystery of "opportunity" formed a chain of fortunate circumstances in her favour, clear through; though there were undoubtedly dark moments also when all seemed lost.

One of these darkest was the problem of help, now that Jane the Skipper was no more. Not even Lisbeth's services could be secured, since it would be scarcely becoming nor decent so soon after Jane's death. Moreover she was now an inmate of the Island, and reckoned with the others of that ilk, beyond the Halfway pale. How Aunt Hetty did long to have Orin and Amsey among her guests. The injustice of their banishment and the unreasonableness of it all, she had no sympathy with, but the will that decreed it was so inexorable, that she had not been moved as yet to put in an intruding hand. When she had met either of them out anywhere, she held conversation with them as with others, but avoided personalities, giving no account of the meeting to her liege lord; but more and more as the years went on did she desire to visit at the Island, and to have friendly communication with them. Twice had she turned her horse's head down that winding road when out on her visiting jaunts, but turned it back again each time; for every one of us has his "limit," and Aunt Hetty wisely felt that the Island folk and the Island feud was hers.

Jane and Lisbeth counted out for help, there remained but the woman at the gate, who chored and scrubbed for Halfway and the farm hands. She could do quite a bit besides, under instruction, but it needed somebody else, and Phoebe was to all present intent not available, since she had openly affirmed the same on the very first mention of it weeks ago, with a toss of her head, too, that betokened conflict, like the horns of a bull—only Aunt Hetty discreetly withdrew just then and the conflict really never come to words.

Those retirements of Aunt Hetty's often saved the situation. If you were so minded to see things distortedly you might call it retreating, but she never did, herself, nor could there be disorder nor rout observed. And in the case with Phoebe concerning the projected entertaining, the wisdom of the little Aunt's method of going before you really had to, vindicated itself, amply; for to have thrashed it out, then and there, might have settled it irrevocably, against Aunt Hetty, while as it was now, she was able to fight another day. So after considering quite a time about it, over her patchwork, she despatched to Phoebe a little missive, written upon her very finest note paper, and elegantly composed.

"Dear Phoebe," [it ran,]

"I am having our small party come off next week, on Tuesday at six, and we will of course expect your presence on the occasion. If you will let me have the loan of those slender spoons of your grandmother's, I would be greatly obliged, as they would be very proper and convenient for a delicacy I wish to serve, the concoction of which I learned on my last visit to town. Naturally I feel the affair quite an undertaking, being so long out of the way of entertaining, though in my first husband's time we were quite gay folk, being young; and even in my second's, licensed preacher though he was, I kept my hand in with sojourning Bishops and the like; and I trust it has not lost its art. But if you are not called elsewhere I would take it a favour that you

drop over within the week, so I can talk out with you the plans; for being so interested in all that pertains to Halfway, you will, as well as I, want our soirée to be a success.

"Ever truly yours,

"Hetty Wisdom.

"P. S. It is hardly necessary to explain to you that I have not as yet consulted Garret. Indisposed as he is, the undue excitement necessary might over-aggravate his condition, though I should not anticipate any objections or obstruction since the guests are all his own kindred.

H. W."

O, rare Aunt Hetty! To borrow from Phoebe's small store, in that cousinly way, when Halfway had dozens of spoons! And to solicit Phoebe's advice, which to Phoebe was more precious than rubies and fine gold, and rarely asked, but scattered full and free over all the countryside; nor diminished on that account, since all giving, though scattering ever increaseth. But the fact so delicately intrusted to the postscript—that surreptitious summoning and springing of the guests upon Garret Wisdom—that would have lured her of itself, even though the other snares had failed. *"If you have no call elsewhere"*—a trumpet and the thunder of drums couldn't have called her anywhere away from Halfway on an occasion like that! *"Have time to drop over within the week"*—she would make time, the very next day, too, if she could catch George and the mail coach! Moreover, she would take with her her valise, to stay the whole week out; and a band-basket beside in which reposed her only and therefore her best silk gown, one that had come down to her from an aunt, a gay affair in its way, of striped green and brown, quite too short, alas, and much too youthful for Phoebe's present age, but very becoming as to colour and style; and there had not been occasion to don it for many a year.

Phoebe tried it on, overnight, and pinched up her cheeks to give the sprightly dash of make-up the gown required (being a New York creation purchased in a moment of folly and a full pocket-book). And Phoebe smiled at herself, a bit, in the small mirror atop her bureau—supposed Nat would be sillier than ever when he saw her in it—wished the mirror was a longer one so she might see herself all the way down—and then ashamed of her masquerading jammed it back into the band-basket again, making an ugly face at herself to atone for the smiling coquettish one of the moment before.

On the following forenoon, Aunt Hetty, standing at the opened side-door to get a look at the skies for probable weather conditions before spreading to them upon the line her damask curtains for airing, saw the stage stop at Halfway gates, and presently afterwards heard a quite audible altercation with George the Mailman as to proper fare, then saw Phoebe herself start up the lane weighted on either hand with valise and basket. When Aunt Hetty saw, and heard, and noted all this, she heaved a sigh of satisfaction and thankfulness, and sat plump down upon the topmost step, almost overcome with wonder at the outcome of her wiles; for all signs now pointed to the success of her feast, unless indeed Uncle Garret might elect to be a skeleton thereat, but as for that Aunt Hetty decided to "leave it till she came to it."

Talk about it being Aunt Hetty's party! It might have been before the call went forth to Phoebe, but now the sceptre passed over to Phoebe—capable, and tireless, and resourceful. Over many a funeral and at many a birth, in many a troubled time had she held full sway, but never before had managed a party, and if it didn't turn out a success it wasn't going to be her fault. Every room in the great house was opened and cleaned; curtains without even a crumple or crease to warrant it, taken down and washed and ironed or stretched afresh; the many windows of Halfway that they adorned or shaded (so many that jealous folk when it was

being built said the owner "wanted to have his eyes out over all the country"), all these small paned eyes were washed and polished till the sinking sun made them gleam like diamonds; the old woodwork was oiled and rubbed to a satin sheen; and the home-woven carpets swept so clean that a popcorn candy ball might have rolled over and over upon their bright stripes without picking up the finest lint upon its sticky sphere.

Aunt Hetty was "favoured" in having a perfect procession of clients as she termed them, come to consult Uncle Garret. For there were new statute laws just enacted, with consequent taxes imposed, and the slack time 'twixt hay and grass left the men free to consult the Stipendiary about them! Though he was masterful and cranky he knew the laws of his country and could set them forth with clearness and with authority. How he had absorbed so much of the world's knowledge was truly a wonder as Silas had said, seeing he had not been at University nor law-courts of the land. But he had used the courses which God and Nature provide us all —eyes to observe, ears to hear and a brain to digest and weigh. No calling in life but he knew some of its workings, with rich store of experience or incident to illumine it. No high place but he would have adorned it. But his gruff and tyrannical manner, his moroseness at his crippled condition, coupled with remorse in his heart, had set him of late apart from his fellows, and only on business did they frequent Halfway, save now and then Alexander and Captain Nat.

What he would have said had the party been proposed to him, it was not hard to guess, but none proposed it. The passing show of housecleaning was put down to doing it while Phoebe could stay a week out. And the clients' coming in unusual numbers kept him busy with documents and hearings. When they were through with, an extra attack of sciatica from over-exertion put him in bed for two whole days, another special dispensation of her luck for the gentle going little Mistress of ceremonies, and Joan was put to hold

the fort within the wing rooms, though her heart and inclinations strayed otherwhere.

Mostly she was called upon to read aloud, for Uncle Garret had set himself to get through Byron, this month, and was now at the stings and taunts of the diatribe upon the English Bards. As Joan's fresh clear voice spoke them forth, he grunted or groaned his approval of the harsher parts, or coming to some passage he knew by heart, saying it over with her, their two voices on together, one reading only the words, with scant understanding of their bitter and caustic intent, the older voice putting into each phrase its full quota from his own life's draught. And though Joan hated the reading of it, and though she did not sense it, yet she was being fed with the pure and sonorous English tongue in one of its finest utterances; severe, and abusive, and ofttimes rough, but the mellifluous numbers of it flowing like a broad and silent river o'er heart and brain. When she came upon the exquisite lines to Kirke White, free from venom or satire, and soaring in sad spirit, Uncle Garret repeated them with her, to the close, making her say them over with him thrice, to fix it upon her memory. And the rancour slipped from his tone and there was sadness in his own recital, for there are other deaths than when the last breath is drawn. But Joan did not know that, all young and bright and sweet, with life yet before her; though she heard the unwonted note in his voice and felt that he was less peremptory than usual, following her about with his eyes around the big room as she put away books and papers (for nothing ever strewed desk or tables at night, even pens and pencils were laid in even rows); responding to her good-night, too, with a kinder grace than usual. She wondered at it, and thinking about it after she had nestled down upon her bed, she thought of the Sonnet itself, that had seemed to call it forth; and tried to say it over, as they had said it through together; finding to her joy that it unrolled before her so that she got

it almost perfect—and fell asleep thus, drawing from out that clear deep well of English verse.

From house-cleaning the preparations went on to cookery; all of this save the whips and the pound-cake was given over to Phoebe. "I know naught of your whips as you call them," said she, "but you're likely to come to grief with them if they're a vanity and a show, for I've often noticed that the one thing you pride yourself on is the one to fail; but I'll not hoo-doo them. And you may have the making of the pound-cake. I don't care myself to take a hand in anything so circumscribed for you as a pound-cake is—equal weights clear through and no chance to use your own gumption. Even so, in spite of all your weighing it's as apt as not to go soggy on you."

So Phoebe took the big brick-oven for her own special operations, filling its cavernous depths, and drawing forth from out it such wonderful and delectable pasties and sweets that Joan had all she could do to keep her eyes off them, much less her teeth; while she and Aunt Hetty weighed and beat their own mixture till the gold mass heaped itself like cumulous clouds at sunset, and was put into its tunnelled pans within the oven of the shining range, emerging thence an hour later as high in spirits as when it entered, and as sound of heart—calling forth just praise from even the stolid and disdainful Phoebe.

For the whips a sweet concoction was made of luscious comfits and tutti-fruiti of Aunt Hetty's own preserving, and set within the cool dairy to ripen; Joan being entrusted with washing and polishing of the tall thin glasses which would hold its richness, topped with froth of cream, and partaken of with Phoebe's slender old spoons. Vanity and a passing show it might be, but no failure, Joan was quite sure of that, for she had sampled it several times, even to a last hasty spoonful when depositing it away for its ripening. She also was to serve it, well on in the evening, to the assembled company, who expecting only the usual candies and

raisins and nuts to crack, would assuredly get the surprise of their lives, for such a dainty had not before appeared in the countryside. Aunt Hetty would be the one to know if it had, for she visited in every household worth while, within the district.

Finally the labours were at an end, all the various viands spread out and stored in pantries and cupboards, while Halfway from top to toe shone like burnished gold. And when the day itself dawned, bright and clear even if a trifle overwarm, Aunt Hetty felt that not a wave of trouble rolled across the success of her party, except the possible eruption from the wing rooms, all as yet inactive, and from all appearances into which not even a hint of the approaching festivity had set a disturbing foot. She planned to make her announcement soon after their early dinner, so when the table had been cleared therefrom and stretched out to its utmost length, Aunt Hetty left the laying of the snowy cloth and the covers to Phoebe and Joan, and stepped away for the wing rooms.

Phoebe had fondly hoped to take a tilt in the tourney, although not once during all the week had reference been made to it. Next to being at the party itself, and "running it," she longed to be present when Garret was bidden to the feast. But the little Mistress of Halfway chose to tread her Via Dolorosa alone, and closed and latched both doors between. From sounds that crept out even past the heavy oak portals, the last bidden guest was not accepting with eagerness nor meekness, and by the brief interims in the harsh sounds the mild little hostess was not being given opportunity of explanation or pleading. From threat of "eating his own supper away from the guests," to "locked doors and chained gates," he flew to a more direful one of Pelig and Joan being sent forth by horse "to cancel every invitation," adding his orders for their immediate summoning to proceed therewith. And when Aunt Hetty ventured to expostulate at this last, he flew into a passion, and

started out to consign her to a dreadful place. He stopped in time, of course, though there was no possible doubt as to the destination intended, but it turned her little mild face white, so that even he in his rage could note it; the brown wispy curls hung flat, her eyes showed dread, giving him a half pang of remorse even though she *had* deserved punishment for such a high-handed proceeding as to actually invite a party to his own house without consulting him. And he really was a gentleman born in spite of the bad temper that tried to disprove it, so he was just about to signify his regret for that half commitment, when Aunt Hetty suddently stiffened before him, the grey eyes, full of spirit now, gave him a steely glint, and in a masterly fashion that wasn't even third cousin to a retreat or a rout, she "retired," closing the doors carefully behind her, as when entering the brief while before.

By the time she had reached the dining room again, her decision was made. The party was going to come off, no matter what the consequences! That telling of her to "go-somewhere," was the last straw. Her "first" had once jokingly said to "go to blazes," but then he had laughed over it and they had made it up on the spot, for they both were young and life was heyday. Even the "second" used to advise her now and then to "go to—Guinea," for a "licensed man" would of course make some kind of concession to his cloth. But to be, at her age, consigned to such a terrible fate by her "third" and lawful husband who had vowed at the altar to love and cherish her! Well, whoever yielded it wasn't going to be herself, now, after that! So though she looked a bit ruffled and drenched as to feathers when she rejoined Phoebe and Joan, she had her course mapped out.

The Master of Halfway was not to be visited for the rest of the afternoon, no matter how earnestly he might request either of the three. Pelig was despatched on an errand so he could not hear the shrill whistle that was his own wonted call. The great front door, both portions, was opened

wide, likewise the side entrance, and "on with the feast" was the watchword of the hostess herself. No Waterloo was going to crash in upon it, far as she could avert. Just once the grey eyes softened, and that was when she cut and filled the big glass bowls with the Wisdom roses, to adorn the supper table, and the hall. They were Garret's favourites, she thought, and O, how hard it was not to be able to enjoy them together. But a swift vision of that dreadful "commitment" screwed her courage to the sticking place again.

At five of the clock they all three flew upstairs to bedeck themselves; Phoebe in her ancestral silk; Joan in the dainty white one that Aunt Hetty had provided, with a sash of blue that was a joy to behold, and ribbons to match it for her dark braids; the little Aunt herself in her green-grey gown, with the pretty lace cape over her shoulders, but beneath the gown instead of the modest white one you would have expected, a ravishing petticoat of silk, pink and swishy, which she had bought in a moment of weakness before this third marriage, but had never ventured to don, so modest and quiet was the garb of the women folk around. To-day, though, she was mad clear through, and she dared anything and everything—that "dare" that dies so hard in a woman, cut off from it in the very strength of her youth because there is a husband to judge her, and the children, and her husband's folks, not to mention that big round public eye; while a man may indulge his, to his last dying breath!

So Aunt Hetty had got out the silk swishy thing and put it on; slippers also; and the modest little stomacher and choker of net that had filled in and up the slightly low cut neck of her gown, she discarded outright, slipping a string of beads on instead over the small throat that was still white and smooth. Moreover, she didn't care a snap what anybody said! It was her first party at Halfway, her own house, and would undoubtedly be her last. Sure she did look a picture, and could easily have got a "fourth" in that

array, with never a question asked as to age. And it being a quarter of an hour of the time set, all three betook themselves downstairs again, for the last orders to the woman of the kitchen, the last touches to the table; all three aflutter with fine feathers and expectations.

Only two hard hearts there were in Halfway, just then—the prisoned banished Master, in the wing rooms, nursing his wrath and indignation; and Pelig, in the outer regions—Pelig, who had seen the feast prepared and borne his own share of the brunt of it in water and wood and hurried rides through the community; Pelig, who had heard over and over the names of the expected guests, all his own kindred and who had orders to station himself at the gates and direct them around to the big front entrance; who saw Joan in the slim beauty of her white frock and sash, with her blue eyes for jewels; Mrs. Wisdom in shimmering gracious garb all unlike the sober woof of everyday, even Phoebe resplendent and gay; Pelig, who still wore his winsey shirt and rough jerkin and jack-boots; Pelig, who had never had a word said to him by either of the three as to his own presence at the festal board.

CHAPTER XVIII

STORM CLOUDS BLOW OVER

IN the front hall Aunt Hetty made herself busy, turning to best advantage the Wisdom roses in their bowls, and the tall vases in the niches with the grass-o'-the-fields to deck them; moving chairs and ottomans now here and now there in the parlours beyond, all the while listening intent for the sound of wheels up the lane and around to the old front driveway; though of course when Pelig directed them thither it was possible they might alight and choose to walk around instead. She had decided to throw open all the doors between the front and the wing rooms, letting the guests after her own greeting of them go out themselves, if they pleased and as they pleased, to meet the master who had refused to be host—all hands taking the consequences together, whatever they might be.

Which of them would arrive first? On that Aunt Hetty made her gamble. And if Aunt Hetty at sixty-nine, in a pink silk petticoat for the first time in her life, and a string of beads, couldn't be allowed to gamble in a small sort of a way, then whenever could she! Considering her provocation too! If it should be the minister first, then the fat would all be in the fire at the very start, since Uncle Garret to the minister was a sworn enemy, on sight, though always good friends before the parting; for the minister had a pocketful of good stories at hand and knew when and when not to tell them; and he wasn't shocked at all at Uncle Garret's mocking of his cloth, because he felt that the mockery was really only a bluff, and he could see down beneath it to the real Garret he had played with, when they were boys to-

gether. In fact the minister had what you call horse sense, still he would have been the very worst one to come first, far as Aunt Hetty could see. Captain Nat and Hannah would be nearly as bad, for Nat had such a bluster about him, that nettled Garret. And Becky would be worse —— O, but what was the use of worrying, for where would her gambling be if she could know outright her chances!

There came a sound of voices around the old driveway. Aunt Hetty picked up her skirts, the pink one and all, and running down the long hall, threw open the communicating door to the passage way, tiptoed down that, and turned softly the knob of the big oak one into Uncle Garret's sitting room, meaning to return as fleet to the wide front entrance to meet the approaching voices; when right before her astonished eyes the outer wing room door opened at the same time, and in walked Alexander, right into the lion's lair. Alexander, tall and ample and splendid, his four eyes beaming a good-natured greeting, Cousin Louisa dressed in her best brown satin with crossed kerchief of lace; and they bore down together upon the Squire sitting in his chair before his desk, Louisa radiant with good humour, and "hoping he was feeling fine and trim to-day for the party, *such* a wonderful idea of his and Hetty's to have them all up together—who *but* Hetty would have thought of it—it had been really an *age* since she had been at a party." Then before Garret could put in a word in reply, she sighted the hostess herself standing in the open doorway, and threw up both hands in admiration, drawing all eyes toward her, Alexander's four, and the hard blue glittering ones of the husband's as well; though caught in the act, so to speak, Aunt Hetty had only *just* remembered in time to drop the silken skirts, at least she *hoped* it was in time, but anybody with half an eye, let alone four, could see she hadn't.

The stern Master never flickered an eyelid in appreciation of it all, but the lack couldn't really be noticed, for close upon the heels of these two came Nat and Hannah. "O,

where was Pelig!" wailed Aunt Hetty to herself, "that he let them in this way, instead of by her directions!" And then she suddenly saw that the situation was saved by this very remissness. To take the bull by the horns at the very outset was doing wonders already; for here was Nat instead of putting his foot in it as she had feared, playing the trump card right into her hand by producing and presenting to his host a jar of tamarinds, straight from St. Kitts, the very thing Garret had been hankering for and couldn't get hold of though he had sent twice to town and offered double price.

"The Mary Jane only got in last night and I happened to be on the wharf at the time—— Had to go into town to buy a whole new fit up for the party," said he with a wink at Aunt Hetty, "so Garret couldn't cut me out with the girls! She made the quickest run I ever heard of, you can almost smell the Island on the wrappings. Thought you'd like it made in drinks this hot weather." And Captain Nat bestowed the big gallon jar wrapped in its ropy netting upon Garret's table.

"Who's the other one for?" asked Alexander, giving a dig at Nat's other arm in the curve of which reposed another and a smaller jar; "Hetty, I suppose!"

"No, it's not," said the bold Nathaniel, "it's for Phoebe. I judged she'd be here, since nobody can get along without Phoebe."

"Except yourself, Nattie," rallied the Postmaster.

"O, well," said the Captain, " 'tisn't my fault. I've asked her often enough."

Sister Hannah smiled at this, a wan but triumphant one, for well she knew who kept Phoebe from being his mate; but here Hetty bore both her and Louisa off to doff their wraps, for the bidden kindred were assembling now by all the doors of Halfway, Joan letting them in one way, and Phoebe another, with greetings upstairs and downstairs and in my lady's chamber.

"Suppose you sample some of this tamarind right now," proposed Nat, "for it's been a hot day. I don't know what the country'll come to unless we have showers soon. Ah! here's water that is water!" as he sighted the big jugful at Garret's elbow. "Nothing like Halfway spring water—with a dash of tamarinds in it! Where are the glasses, Garret?" There had been scarcely a minute's opportunity for the host himself to speak, all hands in the exuberance of arrival talking at once, and Joan to be greeted besides; thus any lack of warmth on his part not being noticed at this outset.

"Get the glasses," said he to Joan.

"Spring falling off any lately?" queried Alexander. "Great source it must have, bubbling up there ever since the first Wisdom came to town, and dear knows how long before; feeding the two houses too, stock and all——" And then Alexander's face flushed for he had surely made a break, and he covered it up quickly as possible by bestowing a smile upon Joan who was just departing for the glasses, and a word of praise of her to her great-uncle. "Smart as a steel-trap she is," said he, "and so friendly with us all too. Seems like having a bunch of Wisdom roses in the office when she's down waiting for the mail. Great thing for the child to have you and Hetty take her as you have."

"And a great thing for you too, to have her here," said Captain Nat.

Joan heard them both, and the praise and love she enjoyed to the full, and glowed under it, for praise was a flower that never blossomed at Halfway. How she did like those dear two who showered it upon her, and yet quick with that thought came another emotion—was it love, or what, that stirred her young heart and drew her also to the stern grim spoken uncle, and to grey old Halfway?

But here Becky, and her husband who was lame, arrived, and the minister in his gig with his wife who was absolutely without guile or humour or unrest, who set her clock steadfastly to the seven days of creation of twenty-four hours

each, and the garments that waxed not old in all the forty years' sojourn in the wilderness, as essentials of believing faith, never tolerating a pendulum's stroke variance from their actual verity, and feeling constrained to thus stand, because her human hearted husband put more stress on life and love, and God all around and within us, no matter when the world began, or would have end.

Other cousins followed, till at last all were present, and O, what a flutter Halfway was in, kettles bubbling on the shining range, all the tempting viands emerging from the cool butteries under Phoebe's marshalling, and finding place upon the big table, people hurrying up and down the long winding stairs, Alexander's hearty laugh, Nat's infectious giggling one; and only the two hard cold hearts—Pelig's, who had not been summoned to the feast, and the Master's, who had refused outright, though the Master was almost in the very midst thereof even now, for the guests would linger in the wing rooms, in spite of all the hostess's manœuvring.

There was nothing for it, therefore, but to announce her supper, and carry out her plan, before them all, but it was not without trepidation within her fluttering heart that she approached the doorway bearing a full spread tray. "We are all ready for supper, now," said she. "Garret thought he would like his in here, as usual," placing the tray upon the table at his hand. But in spite of her courage her thin voice trailed off in sheer fright at the last words, and she had to hold her head high for steadiness, as she led the way out of the wing room.

An exclamation of surprise almost rose from every throat, but was smothered in time, though astonishment was upon every face.

The Master of Halfway had been fairly caught. If he wanted to move at all he had to move quick, or stay in the trap; the guests were beginning to follow their leader.

"I've changed my mind," said the Master of Halfway.

"Lord, one wouldn't guess from what we all know of you

that you had one to change," put in Captain Nat, ready at the wheel if there was danger of getting off the course.

"My stars and senses, Garret, we wouldn't have supper without you at the head of the old table," said Alexander, "if you really feel able for it. I'll draw you out myself, and the others can go on ahead, if they will." And before you could say Jack Robinson, there they all were seated at the great table, sixteen strong, little Joan at the Master's request seated upon his right. To have heard him assign her to this post of honour you might have supposed it was his very own party, given at his own behest for the bringing out of that same small winsome Joan. It was odd, too, that everything was there at his hand as he liked it to be when he had been used to presiding, three carvers, and the two sharpeners, large spoons, and little spoons, any one of which he always asked for, and preferred, if it was not in sight, an array which would have surely puzzled sore a stranger; his own special horn-handled knife also, for his own using—all of which going to show that in spite of her fears Aunt Hetty's faith had really been very much greater than the grain of mustard seed.

The Master's eye travelled down and around the festive board, that glittered with crystal and silver, noted the great bowl of the glowing roses that the first Wisdom bride had brought to her new home, riding on the black horse, behind her husband; looked over the bright and cheery faced kindred gathered about it; lingering a bit in spite of himself upon her who sat opposite him with gold beads about her throat and a gay pink petticoat beneath her modest gown. If only he could have given her even the tiniest wink of his eye, as Alexander was wont to do for Louisa, what a satisfaction it would have been, to them both; but Garret Wisdom neither relaxed nor relented, by nature, and hadn't as yet been brought to it by grace. Nevertheless it all looked good to him, and as far as in him lay he capitulated and gave himself up to the joys of the feast.

"For what we are about to partake," said he, "I guess we'll have to thank Hetty and Phoebe, and if anybody wants to go further back than that he can do it, on his own account."

The minister's wife who hadn't a sense of humour pressed her husband's arm in outraged propriety, an imploring pressure that urged him to a defence of the faith, but that worthy man even though he had prepared an unusually good line-o'-grace to fit the occasion, used his "horse sense" and declined to enter the lists.

Aunt Hetty, though horrified, was already only just out of one kettle of fish, and decided to let well enough alone. "They were all Garret's folks anyway, not hers! But somebody would have to say something, quick, or the whole thing might be spoiled at the very start off."

It was Cousin Alexander who came to the rescue. "Makes me think of the first Sunday I taught class when I was a young man, a bunch of the coloured section over the Hill; and I hadn't got a fair starter on the lesson when one of them opened up by asking me who made him. I could tell him that, of course, but he led right on and asked me who made his Maker. They were husky fellows, and I had to think quick and wise or lose them, likely, so I said, "Now look here, if I do tell you that, then you'll want to know who made the other one, and so on, and so on." And they saw the point and backed down on their quibbling, accepting their Maker as God. "And no one of us," continued Alexander, tall and straight and kindly, "No one of us here, has reached our age, without knowing where to look to give thanks for this food, and for all our other blessings as well—among which I would especially mention Hetty and Phoebe, as Garret has himself said."

It was a straight hit, and Garret wouldn't have taken it from anybody present except Alexander. But it was really the chickens coming in just then that saved the situation all around, four of them, upon the huge old Sheffield platter.

Even one chicken, plump and brown, is a joy to see appearing, and a pair is just as good again; with three, all ready for eating, you throw dull care to the winds; but four arow, upon the same dish, is riotous living! Sixteen legs and wings, not to mention the oysters and upper thighs, with the portly breasts overflowing with dressing, thrown in!

And it was a sight to see the Stipendiary carve them. Next to doing a thing well, is to have other people see you do it; and carving was one of his special accomplishments. With his trusty blades he cut and clove, so dextrous, so precise of joint, that you knew just to watch him that he not only "could say his own bones," as Silas of the Post Office had averred, but a chicken's as well; and so quickly done that nobody seemed to be last served, but everybody enjoying their plates at once.

How blithely they talked over them, too, with Nat's sea yarns to split your sides, and the minister's pocketful to match them; and Cousin Louisa's recital of bright incident told with shining eyes and delightful manner; high converse too, affairs of state discussed and settled with the easy assumption of Downing Street or Ottawa; gay badinage tossed across and around among them; all, even to Hannah wan and weary, joining in the fun, save Joan, the guest of honour at Uncle Garret's right, but though silent, fairly revelling in this gathering of her kinsfolk—the first, the very first party she ever was at in all her life.

When she said so, in answer to somebody who asked her how she liked this particular one, it just happened that there was silence for one brief minute in the banter that circled the festive board, and her clear young voice could be heard by all.

"Never at a party before!" exclaimed Cousin Alexander.

"Why, they'll have to give another one specially for you, of young folks, if we could scare up enough. That's the way we always did at our house when the boys were home, a

gathering of the old folks first, and with what was left over have another for the youngsters, eh, Louisa?"

"Not with what was left over," corrected Louisa. "We never put it that way. We prepared enough at first for both occasions."

"Same thing," said Alexander; "broad as 'tis long as far as I can see, though Louisa is always at me for the way I 'put' things, the women are great for appearances, and proper presentation of their ways——. But leaving that alone I guess there'd be enough young folks around if you took them up to George's age. George is a great admirer of yours," turning to Joan again. "It's the girls that are scarce around here."

"That young person Jane brought up," vouchsafed the minister's wife, "appears to be a very proper girl, and now that Orin Wisdom has taken her she ought to be a very good mate for your niece."

This to Aunt Hetty, next to whom she sat, and would have gone on at greater length, and danger, but it was the minister's turn to give a restraining nudge this time, knowing which quarter the wind blew as to the Island affairs, thus diverting her safely back to Jane herself, and the sudden death.

Then one of the Cousin's wives who didn't know Halfway snuff, began to speak of Jem the gipsy's death, and that way also lay danger, but Louisa sensing the peril there, steered the talk out into the broad waters of generality, and off the Halfway rocks, without a breath of it ever reaching the Master.

Cakes, preserves, and Phoebe's biscuits and crumpets and tarts, followed the chickens, with the pound cake cut in broad slices within the low baskets, and doughnuts so crisp and thick through that Uncle Garret sighting them and realising the concession they stood for, swallowed with them his last compunction and gave himself over to the pride that Halfway could spread such a feast. Down beneath it all was a pride

also in having a wife who could thus plan and achieve it, even if surreptitiously. And when the feast was at an end the squire of Halfway made excuse to Alexander to pull him again to his own rooms while the others repaired to the drawing-room; a few minutes afterward joining them there, arrayed in frock coat and fresh cuffs and tie, since he only of all the assemblage had not had on a wedding garment, being surprised as it were! Now, drawn in easily and blithely by the strong kindly cousin, properly clothed he was, and in his right mind, for this brief while at least the evil spirit within him exorcised, no matter how long had been its spell behind nor how far it yet stretched on before.

In the drawing-room the hostess had her own mode of entertainment, albums, views, puzzles of tortuous rings, and various knots to learn to tie, for those who wished them; while Aunt Hetty herself, commencing at the doorway with a chair brought in from the hall for the purpose, would seat herself upon it next the first of the circle of guests, "visiting" with her or him, as the case might be, talking over their various interests. Asking this "visited" person to change places with her, she would sit over again in the vacated chair to "call upon" the next in turn, with the same kindly concern as to family and affairs, those visited, their tongues loosed and their hearts warmed up, making more ready converse with their neighbours, and Aunt Hetty thus paying proper personal attention to every guest, with no one left out in the cold.

Half way down the room the Squire of Halfway held his own court, upon his enforced throne with its broad footrest and broader arms, not dispensing laws unwelcome, nor bearing down of claims, nor defying custom and courtesies, but the attentive host, making welcome and glad the kinsfolk gathered in this home of their fathers.

At the upper end was Joan, upon one of the high old sofas, between Hannah and the minister who were both asking her a great many questions. Captain Nat and Phoebe sat bolt

upright upon the opposite one, looking over an album's contents, ancient and modern, Phoebe's gay striped gown spread with modest concern far down as possible over her protruding feet. Sometimes at a special sally of her admirer's, she would sit back with uproarious laugh so far upon the cushions that the flounces flew out and up with direful flare before she would catch Hannah's disapproving eyes opposite, and edging over close to the front would draw it carefully down, forgetting over and over again, and as suddenly remembering, with frantic pulls, till it finally got on Captain Nat's nerves.

"O, let her reef!" said he in loud hearty voice, "it's only boots and stockings anyhow! Where's the harm!" So at the general laugh she abandoned the chase, and gave herself up to the attractions of her partner.

Everybody happy, and the "whips" yet to come! The Rising-Sun patchwork in its intricate squares of radiant and radiating lines of orange and red, was being passed around, Aunt Hetty explaining their apparent maze in a manner sufficiently puzzling to discourage any attempt at imitation, and was just announcing to them all that "suns might rise and suns might set, before she would ever make another," when suddenly her voice died away in clear dismay at the sight that met her astonished gaze, for there stood Pelig, just across the threshold of the great drawing-room.

Pelig, who had not been invited to the party, whose heart was hot and hard, a bitter, stolid anger that he had not known was within him; remonstrance at his poverty, surging and sweeping him through; at his lot in life, and its meagre joys meted out to him; a white anger at the master who ruled so hard even if just, who proud of his wealth and position had scorned him because he was an hireling, not reckoning him with those others bidden, though of the same blood and name. He would sting that pride, rouse his wrath before them all. For Pelig did not know it was Aunt Hetty's own party, and not Garret Wisdom's.

So in he had gone, standing for a moment, thus, in the wide doorway, before them all. "O, why had none of them thought of him!" Joan understood, and her young heart winced, a sharp pain cutting through it, at his exile, and the passion within his own that must have beaten him so sore before he had dared this. Her eyes smarted with sudden fear at what might befall him from those stern merciless lips of the Master. "O, why had she and Aunt Hetty forgotten him, and what would it be that would descend upon that red defenceless head!"

He was not in party attire, but the necktie that had graced his winsey shirt since Joan's advent at Halfway was tied with special care, his well worn trousers tucked inside his high jack-boots, the shock of red hair patted more damply than usual over his freckled forehead; and the Wisdom eyes, blue, deep and tender, and cynical now as the Master's own, shone from out it all.

Garret Wisdom's face that had unbent in some story he was telling, turned instantly hard at sight of the intruder.

Phoebe bolt upright upon her sofa with Captain Nat, gave an half audible snort of satisfaction at thought of her arch enemy's dismay and hurt pride, then suddenly drew it back, in sympathy instead with the youth himself.

The guests, not getting a cue from the household as to what they should themselves do, did nothing, seeing in the newcomer only the boy who had taken their horses, Garret's man; for Halfway was far from the village and Pelig had not often gone thither, to be known of them.

Still he stood, just across the threshold. Aunt Hetty was three quarters round the circle when he entered. It appalled her at first. After so many rapids safely passed here was another to navigate, and she feared shipwreck at last, for the scowl was gathering black upon her husband's face. What should she do? O! why had she forgotten him! He had harnessed her husband's spirited steed more than once at her

request and refused to give evidence against her by admitting it, though no pact between them passed their lips save that she was mistress and he hired to do her bidding. They rarely spoke together above the necessary communications, but he seemed often at hand when something heavy was to be borne and himself bore it in her stead.

Nor had she on her own part failed him. Never once since his first advent to Halfway and its dining room, had she missed laying his place at table; seldom had he used it but it always awaited his pleasure, and he knew it. His bed, spread in the ell-chamber, was made with white and scrupulous care, and the whole chamber kept in unison, while never before had he known aught but the rough blanket and heavy coverlid of a "farm hand." It had not escaped his perception, it had indeed been a pregnant factor in the strong and subtle change that had come upon him since living here. Thus instinctively, in the dreadful pause, with the scowl upon the hard handsome face of the Squire and the puzzled astonishment upon all those others, he turned to her. Nor did she fail him now. Gently and quietly she faced it—she would do what she could, as a woman from old time ever hath. It was *her* party, and this unbidden forgotten guest should not lack his welcome even though claimed at the eleventh hour. "Take my chair, Pelig," she said, "and sit by Cousin Becky. I have to go out presently to see about the refreshments. Pelig helps us with the work——" And then she stopped, in fright again at what she had uttered, the very thing she would most have desired not to say; and herself glanced appealingly around, at Phoebe, at Joan—— Would neither of them help her over the hard place, hostess though she was!

And lo, a greater than Solomon was there. Aunt Hetty's party? Yes, all hers, but Uncle Garret's house, and the home of his forefathers, his, *and Pelig's!*

"Sorry I can't offer you my own seat, Pelig," he called out, with a touch of banter that set the youth, and them all, at

ease. "I don't suppose you ever saw so many of your people before," said he. "Pelig is one of the ilk all right, though somewhat remote, and he's the last one of his branch—descended from my great-uncle Jock, who settled at Hardscrabble, and things rather went against him; but he was a great wit, and I can remember hearing him talk with my father when I was a boy. Glad you got through in time to come in, Pelig."

O, surely that would atone for many a stormy wind that blew. And the affable majesty of his mien as he said it gave Joan a thrill of joy and pride.

The Postmaster rose and extended his hand. "Happy to meet you," he said with kindness. "Don't do much corresponding, I'm thinking, for I've never had a letter for you to my knowledge."

Cousin Louisa added her own gracious greeting.

"Better go the rounds, Pelig," called Captain Nat, always ready to mollify, and with a sailor's welcome, "you're younger than most of us here, except the ladies of course, so we'll sit in our seats and you can navigate the circle, see? You know Phoebe, that much's done with, and you can go on to the next."

Poor Pelig! He rose from the seat Aunt Hetty had proffered him, and essayed to go his rounds, but it looked hard work. Then it was Joan's turn to do her part. "I'll go with you," said she blithely, springing from her sofa; "we'll find out our relations together, Pelig."

And thus together they trod the big flowered carpet, and described the circle, Pelig's face growing redder at every shake and bow; by the time they reached the doorway again the beads of perspiration stood out on his high, freckled forehead, and his hands were clammy and cold. But someway those kindly handshakes had stirred something within him, not the sullen dogged resentment that had led his feet inside Halfway dining room, and had set them thither, here, but a warm deep glow instead, that linked him with things

that were above and beyond his daily lonely toil. That circle of old faces belonged to *him,* the pictured portraits upon the wall and the high mantel, were *his* kinsfolk—his, who had grown up his life thus far with only his mother's memory for love and comradeship, their bond the bitter fact that father and husband had played them false, consigning them to poverty and shame. He had seen him in his drunkard's grave, had seen his mother in her lowly one, and had nor brother nor sister beside. Though he had known the Wisdoms were his kin, yet his heart had been set at naught against them, and he had not announced himself, except that first station of his Cross, at the big old dining-table on the day of his arrival at Halfway.

Since Joan's coming, though they seldom talked together, a breath of new life had sprung up within him, a longing, unattainable he deemed, that had no voice, scarce even a being, but had moved him to make protest this night at his banishment from these kindred, and their acceptance that his lot in life was another than was theirs. But now the sullen resentful emotion was swept away, something leaped within him, and he knew that he was going to fulfill his life, some day, some way.

It was Joan, with her keen intuition, who sensed that the interview as at an end. "Aunt Hetty," said she, "we'll both help you with the whips." Thus all three went out together.

And from that on, without another break, the party went merry as a marriage-bell. The whips made their sensation, and were extolled to Aunt Hetty's satisfaction, the sweets and fruits as well. The women folk who one and all, except the minister's wife, were linked up with Halfway, and remembered old days in its great rooms in childhood and girlhood, clamoured to see the place throughout, so while the men finished up the evening out in the wing-rooms, these all trooped the place over, led by the proud hostess who

well knew that not a speck of dust nor trace of disorder would make her ashamed.

Joan thought that was the very loveliest part of it all, for they paused on thresholds to tell tales of old doings within the rooms; told her about that other Joan, her grandmother, whose bedroom she herself had; and Cousin Becky asked if she had learned to weave, yet, and started to ask about a loom-room, but Aunt Hetty called Joan away just then to light the candles in the third story chambers. And when she had thus done, waiting up there for them to join her, standing on the high landing above them all, somebody exclaimed, "It's Joan herself come back to Halfway! Do look at her!" Cousin Becky, who was the first to mount, catching her in her arms and hugging her tenderly because she used to love that other Joan in the long ago.

Straight through to the very end it was a success, Aunt Hetty getting praise for all the events, and invitations enough to last out the rest of her days.

"The very loveliest, dearest time I'll ever have in all my life," thought Joan, as at length she was ready for her downy nest. Which was quite true, for though there would be many another at Halfway as the years went on, Joan could never again have a first real party in her first real home. There is an indefinable interest in first things.

When she was very nearly off to the Land of Nod, after going over and over all the doings, suddenly she waked wide with two things she remembered somebody saying. One was what Cousin Alexander had said about the spring keeping two houses going; she wondered what he meant; and not being able to think it out, tucked it away in that little orderly mind of hers along with that thing Lisbeth had discovered, that had looked like a plugged-up hole in the stone wall of the spring; though she did not recall that now, nor know that the two were stored up side by side.

The other was a remark of Cousin Louisa to Aunt Hetty

as they went down the stairs together, not knowing Joan was behind and couldn't help hearing. "I'd teach her to weave if I were you, for it's really being revived again now that the Arts and Crafts Societies are everywhere, but don't let her touch that unlucky piece; she can learn on the small loom, and it will be so handy for her, opening right off her own bedroom."

What room could Louisa have meant? There was no door to be seen in Joan's own except the one into the hall. Well, she would ask Aunt Hetty about it to-morrow, or perhaps Uncle Garret himself, for it was going to be lovely from now on, at Halfway, with Uncle Garret so fine and agreeable!

CHAPTER XIX

ROUGH SAILING

"WASN'T Uncle Garret splendid, Phoebe," said Joan next morning, she and Phoebe busy over putting away the extra service that had been brought from out the old closets for the party. "I suppose we'll always have good times with him now."

Phoebe gave a decidedly dissenting sniff. "Good times," said she in tones to match. "Well, as yet, I haven't noticed any signs of the millenium at hand. Your Aunt Hetty has already had one session with him this morning. He was only showing off last night, proud of his house and his wares. He did it thinking she'd be expecting a blow-out before them all, and that he'd surprise her and take the wind out of her sails. That's the only reason he was perk and fine. He's a whited sepulchre."

"I don't think I know what that means," answered Joan, loth to let go the vision splendid of a reclaimed Uncle Garret, who would shower his good nature upon them all the days ahead. "He looked so well and handsome," said she, "not sick a bit like he always looks in his own room. And Phoebe, he was splendid to Pelig, and you can't say he wasn't. Phoebe, why didn't any of us think about Pelig, but leave him out the way we did! I know Aunt Hetty wouldn't have done it on purpose, she had so much to be remembering, but you and I might have thought of him. It must have been awfully hard for him to come in, the way he did. I don't believe I could have done it, and I don't think I would have wanted to, anyway, if I'd been treated like that."

"Then that's a Wisdom trait you haven't got. We like to do stubborn things that people aren't expecting of us. That is why your Uncle Garret came in to the party and put on his best behaviour with his best coat. And as for being hard for Pelig to do as he did, it's hard things that bring out qualities in us; no heavy load to lift and we grow no muscle. If Pelig hadn't been good and mad, clear through, like he was, and determined to show up that he was a Wisdom, why none of the folks would have known about him, while now since he announced himself, he'll find every one of them is his friend. I heard them all asking him up when they were getting off; and to my own mind he's a likely fellow and will come on in the world if he gets a chance. If Garret Wisdom had any soul he'd give him some kind of a lay-out along with his work, a piece of land to be farming on the shares, or something like that, so he could try himself out, over and above mere wages; or let him stay on here and learn how to manage Halfway, for somebody has got to have it and run it when he's dead and gone—it'll be tight squeezing for him to try to take it along with him, the underground route he's got to go."

Joan was rather aghast at this utterance, but in such close contact with her all the past week had become somewhat used to Phoebe's vivid speech. Phoebe would probably be going away to-night, and there was something Joan wanted to ask her about while she seemed approachable. "Phoebe," said she, "did you know I was ever here before, once when I was an awfully little girl?"

Phoebe finished polishing the whip glasses, and standing on a chair set them in row upon the upper shelf of the crystal closet, got down and surveyed them, with discriminating eye as to position, and pushed the door to.

"Well, what if I did?" asked she coolly, snapping the catch and setting back the chair.

"But you never told me," said Joan.

"Did I have to? Least said soonest mended."

"I don't see how it could hurt to say something about it," ventured Joan, already half squelched by the non-committal tone, but still persisting.

"I had nothing myself to do with bringing you here the other time," said the woman, "nor now, either, so what call had I to talk about it soon as I saw you! When Providence doesn't point out where I'm to take a hand in things I sit back and watch it out. It was your Uncle brought you back this time, and as a rule Garret Wisdom plays his own hand, Providence or not, thus far along in life, but there'll be a reckoning for him some day. He's calling you now"—as the impatient, imperative voice sounded out from the wing rooms—"Jo-ann, Jo-ann."

"Go to him quick. I know that tone all right—I guess your 'fine handsome' uncle of the party must have run away somewhere! You might have talked too much, anyway, if you'd been left here. The people who talk the least always know the most, remember that. But don't be too afraid of your Uncle Garret. You're too young to let it be a shadow over you. He's screeching again—wanting you to find something that's right before his very nose, too, I'll warrant—but run on in, if you want to save your skin."

Certainly the fine handsome uncle of the party had fled, as Phoebe rightly surmised, for little Joan could find no trace of him in the wing rooms where the Uncle Garret of old held his wonted sway over everything that was within them, and everybody who crossed their threshold.

Aunt Hetty deeming it wise that the victor should not glory over the vanquished while defeat and conquest were still fresh in mind, stayed apart much as possible that first day after her triumph, since there was Phoebe to bear the brunt, and Joan to come and go on. Also, she too was loth to relinquish her vision of the courtly, genial husband who had so gloriously helped her carry off the honours the evening before; and to thus absent herself she could still dwell upon the memory.

So Joan and Phoebe together had a day of it. Nothing seemed to go right with him. It was in reality the bodily effect upon his mind of the over-exertion, but he did not connect it at all with himself, thinking instead that everybody and everything was out of joint. The "Free Press" editorials were intolerable, Alexander in the warmth of heart after the party having sent up the mail to Halfway by a passing teamster. A letter that he had expected from town did not arrive. Some young cattle broke down a fence and got in among the corn, and Pelig being in a distant portion of the place at the upper barns could not be got hold of to drive them out. Things went wrong right up to the night itself which was hot and muggy, and hard to sleep through, even though the little wise and still-tongued wife fixed him exactly to his own demands, coming to him again in the morning with fresh water she had herself brought up from the spring, and a trayful of breakfast fit for a king.

Phoebe who had borne yesterday's brunt, being absent to-day, Aunt Hetty had to take a hand at the ropes, with Joan, and between them they weathered through, but it was rough sailing, and on toward the evening's close, when neither were needed in attendance, Joan sought out Aunt Hetty at her patchwork of the Rising-Sun.

"What makes you *let* him be so bad and cross?" she asked, even young as she was seeing the needlessness and the selfishness of the petulant tyranny, and stung to expression even if she should meet reproof.

"Let him!" The mild voiced little aunt looked her surprise at the question. "Who could stop him?"

"But he hasn't any right to spoil everything so, in this lovely dear old place."

"Your Uncle had felt a chill most of the day," explained his tolerant wife. "The east wind came up in the night, through that opened window by his bed."

"I know, but *we* didn't do it, Aunt Hetty. He made you

leave it open, himself. I heard him tell you. But he doesn't need to be cross just because he's cold."

"When a man is cold and chilled he is madder than if he was stung," said Aunt Hetty. "I don't know why, but they always are. My other two were the same."

"Well, he was too hot the night before, and he was just as bad," persisted Joan, astonished at her own liberty of speech, but constrained thereto by the harsh treatment they two had so unjustly born. "And Aunt Hetty, when he spilled the ink this afternoon, all himself, for we weren't near him, what made him cross at us? We didn't do it! There ought to be somebody to make him be nice and pleasant all the time, like he was at the party."

"I don't know that anybody ever tried to make your uncle do anything; the shoe is on the other foot always. But that's only his manner, and you mustn't worry over it so. I don't know why I don't mind it myself more than I do, unless it's maybe because I've had experience with husbands, and know they all have their bad points, as well as their good ones—and sometimes lately," said she, half musingly, while she matched a corner square, "sometimes lately, I have thought that we women may possibly have little ways of our own, too, that bother them—possibly."

"But I wouldn't mind the words he says, if he didn't say them so hard, and so loud. And I know it's not right for me to notice, but, Aunt Hetty, I don't think you ought to *let* him scold and shout so at you when you haven't done a single thing to deserve it."

"Maybe not," said Aunt Hetty, after one of the long pauses she often left between a question and its answer. "But the way I reason about it, since he is kept to his bed and his chair, is, that when I don't like it and can't stand it I can go out away from it all, and he can't follow to keep it up. Providence blessing me in this respect I hardly think it's necessary to take him to task. If I was here all the time at his elbow I'd get the doldrums myself likely, and

answer back. There's nothing so contagious as bad temper." And she reached over for her piece basket to place within it her squares when she should have matched and counted them, a sign manual of self-absorption and dismissal.

Joan had been thus set aside many a time before, for Aunt Hetty never seemed to have breath nor desire for long conversations, but this time her abstractions deterred not Joan from pursuing her train of thought, for she had determined, made bold by her two months' residence at Halfway and her whole-hearted reception by all the Wisdom folk, to talk it out this time about the stormy uncle now that she was at it. And so she waited quietly a bit, watching the little thin fingers picking out the red and orange rays to get their adjustment to the pencilled pattern; then seeing that two seams were ready for an easy run up, she ventured again upon her theme.

"Aunt Hetty, if you know you can't change him—couldn't we ask the Lord to do it? He was so lovely at the party, he ought *not* to be let go back again to the old bad way."

The Rising-Sun sank out of sight in Aunt Hetty's basket, fallen from her hands in surprise at such a question. "He'd hardly thank us for praying for him," said she. "I don't suppose anybody has prayed for him since his mother died, when he was a bit of a boy."

"Perhaps that's why," put in Joan eagerly, and wistfully also at sudden thought of the stormy great-uncle a bit of a boy, and motherless, like herself. "But why couldn't we do it for him, Aunt Hetty?"

"I suppose it's because he's so strong willed, and masterful, and able to manage his own affairs for himself always," replied she, slowly, thinking it out as she went along, for herself as well as for Joan. "We're always more used to praying for the kind who can't help themselves, maybe. It's a long time since your uncle has been inside a meeting-house," added Aunt Hetty who was of the type needing the outward

medium of pulpit and pew to constitute communion with the Unseen. And then a half smile flitted over her little old face.

"I don't know as I ought to tell you," she said, "but the last time we were together at the little church at cross-roads, St. Paul's they call it, they had a new melodion to play on, and the one who was doing the playing got into a pretty quick tune, and it grated on your uncle, someway, though he's not what they might call religious; for he's old-Zion, if he's anything—Presbyterian without a gown. But he was mad, anyway, with so much getting up and down, as his rheumatism was just setting in then, so when the music got into a fair jig with an anthem they were going to sing, he got up and went out. We were way up at the front, but out he went, all the way down the aisle stepping slow like, to that tune. Of course I couldn't see it myself, but Louisa told me he stepped it off as plain as could be, though with a solemn face, and by the time he got back to the door the whole church was a titter—it was scandalous. And he never went there again, nor any other place either, and so I am largely kept from attending the means of grace myself, Joan. But the minister told me at our party that old-Zion was to be opened up again, and if that's so we'll try to attend. Your uncle ought not to make any objections to old-Zion, and even if he does there probably will be some way we can manage it. If there's not one way, there's always another."

"O, I can remember going there, when I was here before," said Joan, "with Mrs. Debbie. O, wouldn't it be dear to go in it again."

"Very likely you were, for Debbie was one of the strongest members. None of the Wisdoms would ever belong to St. Paul's. The Halfway family always had the long side pew in old-Zion, and now that the high partitions have all been lowered we'd have a great view of the whole congregation from it. I'd like to be there again hearing the old psalms sung through, for excuse ourselves as we may, Sunday isn't

Sunday, unless you've been to the Lord's House; and month after month to go on without appearing there isn't good for any of us. I've missed it more than I owned to. We'll plan to go regular, Joan, soon as Zion opens up."

And after a little pause, "Pray for your Uncle, if you wish to, child. But you speak of your Maker with what I might perhaps call too much assurance—as if you talked to Him, like you would to a mortal."

Joan was troubled an instant with the rebuke, then sought to explain. "I hadn't any one else, to talk to, about things, so often," said she, "for you know I never had a real home before, that I belonged to; and I used to wonder where I'd be next, and what I ought to do, so I had to ask somebody, Aunt Hetty, and I thought that He wanted us to ask for help."

"Maybe so," said Aunt Hetty; "maybe so," though she did not see it clear, as did Joan. But dear little Aunt Hetty had had distractions, prosperity, health, three husbands, and twenty-seven patterns of patchwork to piece up, and perhaps we shouldn't blame her because she had not sought Him, yet, often as had Joan. He is for us all, at our cries and for our needs, but O, surely means more to those who need Him most and with faith oftenest cry. And well was it for Joan that thus early in her life, before the billows and the waves should roll over her, she knew where she might find Him.

"I think you had better go up to bed, now," said Aunt Hetty presently. "To-morrow maybe will be an easier day. I always notice that things go in threes, snow and wind and rain, and bothering circumstances as well; three days of whatever it is and then a change, so to-morrow'll be a better time. I wouldn't mind having three days of rain," added she, "for it is getting so dry around that I feel choky just breathing in the air, and there is no more than a foot of soft water in the tank, Pelig tells me. Good-night, Joan," as Joan turned at the door and met the older placid gaze; "learn not to mind about your Uncle's ways; you are too earnest, just

let it slide off you.—You may kiss me good-night if you like."

If she liked! The recipient had no doubt whatever about the "liking," for Joan bestowed upon her such a hearty vigorous hug that the patchwork basket fell to the floor in confusion, and the side combs from out her wavy pretty hair. But she didn't object a whit, for dear knows when she had had a hug like that, and settling herself back under the pleasurable sensation of it, the little Aunt who had worked always along the lines of least resistance, least shock, fell again to her patchwork till it should be time to fix up her husband for the night.

"Queer face she's got," thought she, as the door closed behind Joan. "Seems like a light, shining out from behind it. When she came up the lane yesterday I could see her face long before I saw the rest of her, yet it's so dark skinned too. Garret's sister was the same, and that big old painting of her and Garret that he had hung away in the loom-room always seemed full of light. I guess I'll have that room opened up for the child, as Louisa suggested. It would help pass her time and take her mind off other things that she dwells on toc much. Garret wouldn't favour it, likely. Still, he never told me not to open it, and it's no good hitting your head against a stone wall, asking him."

Joan climbed the long winding stairs, with the little lamp that lighted her way, in her hand; and the one that lighted her face, within her heart; and when she had made ready for sleep, and left her door ajar as Aunt Hetty always had told her to do for company, she cuddled herself down in the big old four-poster to think a bit, before the delicious drowsiness of youth's sleep should fall upon her. Her prayer for herself, and her own doings and small problems, she had said upon her knees at the bedside. But there was another petition to be made this night, a prayer for Uncle Garret.

Suddenly that picture of him, tilting down the aisle to the melodion's tune, came to Joan's vision, and she tittered outright at thought of it—*how* she would have liked to see him

do it, though of course it had been a dreadful thing to do, in a church! Then those lines to Kirke White which he had repeated so sadly, came to her mind, and she said them over, now, herself, remembering his own rich voice that had dropped its wonted harshness; thought of his splendid greeting of Pelig at the party and all his fine and courtly manner throughout the evening; then of his everyday mood. O, what a funny, darling, ugly, splendid old thing he was! And if Aunt Hetty wouldn't make him better, and the minister didn't think it best to try, and she herself didn't know how, then there was just the Lord who could!

So Joan sent up her prayer for Garret Wisdom. And it went straight up to the Throne.

Who was Garret Wisdom? asked they before the Throne. What were his records? Had his name ever been placed in the Lamb's Book of Life? Turn back the leaves—back, back, O, so far—yes, here were his chronicles. Three score years and more ago some one had sent up petitions for him—a mother, upon her knees beside his little bed.

"Remember, Lord, that he is Thine,
The sign of covenant grace he wears.
Through erring sinful careless years
O let him ne'er forgotten be,
Remember all the prayers and tears
That made him consecrate to Thee!"

Then there had been a bond fixed once, 'twixt him and his Maker. *"The sign of covenant grace he wears."* And he had strayed, had erred, had himself forgotten, when any moment since, in all these years, he could have reached out his hand, and found his mother's God, and his!

Yet here was another prayer coming up on his behalf, and in the saying of it, fervent and loving and believing, Joan fell asleep.

CHAPTER XX

AUNT HETTY VISITS TOWN

AUNT HETTY was going to town on a visit, to remain a week or more, leaving Phoebe in charge at Halfway.

Joan would have given hat and boots to be taken along too, and just for one brief delicious moment had thought Aunt Hetty premeditated it; but the illusion vanished, Joan being informed instead that she was to be "company" for Uncle Garret—the only thing she had been brought to Halfway for, and all that gave her right to dwell therein, she knew that, without being told.

The party had without doubt been a success, the *éclat* still lingering in Halfway circles, though no mention of it had ever been made by the Master himself. But the flavour of the feast must have tarried with him, for to Aunt Hetty's great surprise instead of making carping protest at her proposed excursion he even aided and abetted her departure.

Though his consenting may have been somewhat on account of the success of the feast, it was largely because Uncle Garret had two axes of his own to be ground in town, both of which could be safely entrusted with Aunt Hetty; for unsatisfactory as she was always presupposed to be from her husband's standpoint, yet he well knew she had her own way of attainment, no more flagrant example of which could be mentioned than her late supper-party.

One of the commissions was to order for him a suit of clothes, of superfine corkscrew West-of-England cloth. No other man in the countryside wore such expensive weaves, and there was only one establishment in all Halifax where

it could be procured. The new stores, with bland and persistent salesmen, might impose another and a modern pattern upon an ordinary buyer, but not upon determined little Aunt Hetty, who would have the corkscrew West-of-England cloth or none.

Garret Wisdom was a vain man as to dress, perhaps to make up for the long years of rough garb in the gold-fields, perhaps from vanity at being Master of Halfway again. No matter how sharp the spasms nor how painful the process, he was attired each day with fastidious care, shaven and shorn, fresh white cuffs about his swollen crippled hands, and a snowy kerchief in his top pocket. Fine feathers do not always make fine birds, as Phoebe rightly put it, and as no one knew more truly than Aunt Hetty who had borne the pecks and claws so long a time; but an untidy, poorly clothed husband, with his warped and querulous ways besides, would have been unsufferable, so she pampered to his toilet and dress.

The other axe to grind, Aunt Hetty was not quite so sure of accomplishing, but she would make the attempt, and it was rather of a venture, anyway. She was to find out about Lisbeth's parentage. Jane the Skipper, evidently had no knowledge of the girl beyond the day she had been deposited upon her high doorstep, for at her husband's behest Aunt Hetty had questioned her concerning it on the day she had worked at Halfway; to no purpose far as Lisbeth and her history was concerned, although Jane had proffered much unasked for information as to her opinion of the squire himself.

Aunt Hetty had been astonished at the bitterness of her speech, and surprised to learn what Jane vouchsafed, that there had been much machination to secure the little triangular piece of property that jutted into Halfway lands in brazen defiant thrust. She did not know how much money her husband was possessed of, but she hoped he was not parting with it all for property, so that they should perhaps be "land poor" in their last days; and she was really glad that

Jane had refused him the extravagant sum offered for the cabin and its rocky bed that sat like a troublesome Mordecai at the Gate of his Halfway Kingdom.

Why he should have any interest in the orphan waif Jane had picked up, Aunt Hetty couldn't for the life of her imagine, but did not over-concern herself, since out of the commission thereof she would get opportunity to visit a parish she had not set foot within for many a year; and the old doctor whom she was to question, having lived there all his long life through, would be able to give her news of many an acquaintance she had lost sight of, even though he should fail in the particular bit of information for which she was sent. It surely couldn't be even possible that her husband was contemplating having the girl up at Halfway to live, for he had been full of wrath at her having been allowed there on even that one day. It had turned out very well, having Joan come back to them, though she had at first been much opposed to that, but to have another girl there would be out of the question altogether. But at that Aunt Hetty ceased her speculations and her concern. It would be time enough to worry when the time came—Aunt Hetty never did things till she came to them.

So rejoicing in possession of a larger sum of money than she had ever before been given, since it had to cover the price of the suit, and extra allowance for the extra journeying, Aunt Hetty set forth, driven by Pelig as far as the Corner, where she met the stage-coach that took her on to the railroad branch. And Joan and Uncle Garret were left behind at Halfway, with Phoebe in charge of all three.

Joan, after the first pang of disappointment at not being taken along, rather felt that every prospect pleased in the two weeks ahead. For one thing sure, she would be free of housework. Phoebe brooked no interference (she never termed it help) in her affairs, and capable and strong rarely needed any in the usual routine, so Joan fancied she might be free to roam about the place a bit. There would be only

Uncle Garret to read to, and to fetch and carry for, and should there be people to consult him in the majesty of the law he dispensed, then she would indeed be in luck, with a possible chance of getting down to the Island again, also.

But the very next morning after Aunt Hetty's departure Uncle Garret came on with a cold. Since she had that many hours the start of it he couldn't blame it upon her defenceless head, as he usually did all the adverse happening, and the lack of a scape-goat made him doubly wrathy. If you can lay the cause of a cold off on some one else, there is some relief, but to bear both the influenza and the blame for it as well, is indeed a heavy yoke.

It was, as he furiously averred more than a score of times on even the very first day of it, the very devil of a cold, seeking out all the weak and vulnerable places where it could lodge and breed discomfort. One day it held sway in flowing eyes and smarting nose. Next, with eyes and nose swollen from the copious streamings it settled itself into sneezing—"K-thrash-ub-K-thrash-up!" All day long the rampant rasping sounds fell upon Joan's ears, with a muttered curse not quite mild enough for a young girl's hearing, accompanying each explosion.

"Keep them back," said Phoebe, after hearing a series of the convulsions attendant upon the operation. "Don't put so much stress on them. You'll burst your own ear drums and ours as well. Keep them back!"

"Keep them back!" roared Uncle Garret. "How can I stop them! I don't make them. You never had a cold like this or you would talk sense!"

"I've had more than a few, as bad, and worse," retorted she. "But I didn't parcel them out onto other people as you do this." And in the spasm that followed his rejoinder she made good her exit. But he refused to speak to her through the rest of the day, only consenting under dire necessity to having her settle him away for the night, though she brought in for him, to have ready at his hand, hot lemonade, black

currant jelly, and a glass of tamarind drink that went right to the spot; for though Phoebe had always to free her mind, with plain speech, yet she never stayed her kindly hand on that account, nor hardened her heart.

Next morning the sneezing had subsided, the influenza settling in limb and joint; and it being baking-day in the kitchen Joan was left in charge of the afflicted uncle, who weak and wrecked by the inroads of the disease, was like a sick and snarling child who has never known control. In the late afternoon Pelig brought up the mail and she was made to read through the "Free Press." Items of news passed by with small comment, but the editorial, and a contributed letter by a rate-payer, were animated fights from start to finish, Joan having to pause every few sentences for his interrupting invectives. Finally deciding that he would himself take a hand in the discussion, sick though he be, he ordered paper and pens, and to be propped up to his desk for writing, giving Joan her release.

She sought out Phoebe in the kitchen. "You'd better take a run up the road before supper," said Phoebe, noting the dark circles under the blue eyes, "or you'll be coming down with it yourself next. It's catching, a cold is, as fever, if only people believed it and practised what they believed. The one who has it ought to be shut up, and fumigated, if that's how you say it—burnt sweet-fern is good as drugs for it, too, and a lump of camphor gum in your apron pocket to sniff now and then has warded off many a one for me. I've a piece upstairs I'll get you when you come back."

"I wouldn't like to have a cold as bad as Uncle Garret's," said Joan.

"His isn't bad as he believes it is! Half is influenza, and the other half is just Garret Wisdom and his spleen and venom. It's a good thing for the children that he hadn't any, for as it is now his angry temper will die with him. But I expect he'd have liked to have some one to leave his money

to, and Halfway," said she, eyeing narrowly the girl to note if there was expectation of it in that quarter.

Joan's face showing no apparent signs of acquisitiveness, Phoebe probed a bit further.

"He's not likely to leave it to church causes, for he doesn't favour Zion. Somebody strange will buy it all up, I suppose, for there's scarcely one of the name left, men folk. There's maybe a family or two out on the coast, the branch your father came from, but so distant they'd hardly count as real family. Now if you were only a boy you'ld have the name and the blood too, on both sides, and would make a fit owner for Halfway."

"O Phoebe, I wish I could have been a man, to have it! It made me lonesome first, and almost frightened, because it was so big and dark looking outside, but I love it more every day now; and that night of the lovely party, all lighted up, I just thought it was the most beautiful place in the world. And I hope Uncle Garret will live till he's a hundred, so I can stay right here."

Phoebe smiled grimly. "There wouldn't be anything left of you to love it with if he was spared that long. If you're tuckered out now with three days of him, think what 'twould be for thirty years!"

"But he might get over being the way he is, for you know how fine he was that night, and once in a while he's good as can be when we're reading some of the books he likes."

"Umph!" ejaculated Phoebe. "It could only be a miracle that worked it. Your Aunt Hetty is too easy going, to my mind, doesn't rein him up as he should be. So he's been let to have his tantrums worse and worse every year. He wasn't that bad when he first came back. You're too afraid of him yourself—but run along now and get a mouthful of fresh air. Maybe you'll see Pelig on your way back and get a lift up from the spring with the water."

"I wish he had good clothes, Phoebe, so he could have had them on that night at the party. Uncle Garret's coats would

fit him, and he has such nice ones—would Pelig wear one of them, do you think? What does Uncle Garret do with his suits? They wouldn't be worn out."

"Do with them! Keeps them all in a row in that big wardrobe, won't have one suit given away. All men hang onto their clothes, squires or what not, raise a row over every dud that their wives dispose of, and always were planning to use that very garment next day! I know them, I've been around in different houses all my life, and they're all the same. Don't make eyes to Pelig, coat or no coat," bantered she, as Joan started down the steps.

"Why, Phoebe! He's a hired man——" and then Joan's face flushed with chagrin. O, why did she say that! Phoebe had the very worst way of drawing out of her things she didn't really want to say, or really mean.

The shaft struck home, as poor Joan feared. "Hired!" mocked Phoebe; "I suppose you call me hired, too!"

"I know you're not," cried Joan, eager for peace, "for the mailman said you weren't, the very first day I ever saw you. He said you 'went and took charge' at places, and that's just what you do, Phoebe."

If Joan's tongue had slipped, that ready wit within her knew how to make up for it. Phoebe was appeased, and a mollified Phoebe was beautiful as the sun after a storm.

"I'm glad George and you know my station," said she. "But hired or in charge I don't like that free and easy way of calling a man the one if he gets low wages and the other if he gets big ones. The members of Parliament are hired, and paid, to work on their country's affairs; the parson who keeps us in straight paths, and the king on his throne, both get their wages; and most of the men who are running the world to-day had to carve out their own way by their earnings. So get that silly notion out of your proud little Wisdom head, and learn early to value a person for what he will himself accomplish, not for what his father did before him. To my mind Pelig as an hireling at Halfway is more of a

man than the master who owns it and won't control his own temper."

Joan was quiet for a moment, trying to put right her answer. "I don't think I really meant it bad as it sounded to you, it came out before I thought," said she. "But you see all the people I had seen, before I came here, who were hired, didn't seem to care about being anything else; and they were rough and dirty, and I'm just beginning to understand how different it all can be. I was poor as could be myself, Phoebe, and had to work for people where I stayed, taking care of their babies, but they were some relation, you know, and they didn't ever really put me off with the people who did their other work. Pelig is some relation, but he's different even if he was not, for he reads a lot of books, and he's nice and kind, and is polite as he knows how. And that was why I wished he could dress in better clothes, like Uncle Garret does. Sometimes, Phoebe, I think he looks a little like him, even in those old rough ones, only of course he's young and Uncle Garret is old."

Phoebe had a sudden thought. "You're right as to that," said she, "I've noticed it myself. There's a big picture of your uncle when he was young like Pelig. It's in the old loom-room."

Joan sat straight down again upon the door stone. "What *is* a loom-room, Phoebe?" she asked. "Aunt Hetty said something about it one day she was up in my bedroom; and I heard some of them talking about it that night of the party, when we were showing them about, you know; and Aunt Hetty told me just before she went away that she thought she would have it opened up for me when she came back. But what is a loom-room? And could you let me see it? Where is it, Phoebe?"

"It's a place where the looms were set up for weaving the cloth we all used in the old days, and it's next to your own chamber, but has been shut up for twice and more as many years as you are old."

"Why?"

"O, that's Halfway news," replied Phoebe laconically. "It's hung in dust and cobwebs now, but the picture shows up great from the high round window."

Joan thought it out for a moment. "How did you get in it, Phoebe?"

Phoebe brightened—"nimble witted, like all the crowd," thought she. "I'll see if their venture is in her, too," and aloud she vouchsafed this—"There's a sky-light in the sloping roof of it."

"And could I get down to the sky-light?"

"If you're steady-headed enough to get up to the ridge pole on one side and sit down for your start on the other, why it's fairly easy sledding."

"But could I squeeze through the window, would it be big enough for that?"

"You make me think of the old man who had two holes cut in his cellar door for the cats to run up and down at night time—a big one for the cat and a little one for her kits," remarked Phoebe dryly.

Joan giggled with glee, and gave the broad shoulder next her a good-comrade squeeze. "O what a goose I was," said she. "What do you come down onto, inside, Phoebe?"

"On your feet, unless you upset in the going."

"Would it be wrong, do you suppose, for me to go?"

"You'll have to be your own judge on that count. I didn't reckon it harm for myself, seeing as I took nothing away with me. And many's the day I've stepped off there, spinning on the old wheels and filling the bobbins for your grandmother Joan when she was a young lady and I a slip of a child. She was a picture, sitting at her little loom; always dressed in the brightest of clothes, and singing while she wove, gay and happy as a bird."

"Is it dark there now if it's all shut up?"

"Afraid?"

"I don't think I'd be, if it was only just dusky, but real

black dark sometimes frightens me, the kind when you can't see *anything* and don't know *what* might be hiding in it."

"I sense what you mean," said Phoebe. "Any real thing you can actually see, you can either try to meet it or run away from it—the fright is in not knowing, and so fearing all manner of bad things. Well, it's not really dark up there, for there's the little wheel-window left unboarded, and the skylight one, but the looms are big black things and they kind of eat up the light, though if you go in broad day it's not too bad."

"When will we go?" asked Joan.

"Well, it's not we who are going. I've been already. And the two of us away when Garret Wisdom calls would be a pretty how-do-you-do! If you choose to try it for yourself, go, but don't tell me about it before hand. I'll be no party to it to aid or abet you. You asked me about the place, and I answered your questions; that's as far as I'm going. It's none of my business what you do at Halfway. Never ask anybody else to keep your conscience for you, take your own risks, and bear your own blame. There's Pelig now. He'll be soon away, so get your lift up with the bucket. He's in awful late, nights, since I came, and he looks worn. Maybe in love, and off courting somewhere."

"She's got to have something to lift her out of the ruts," commented Phoebe, as Joan passed down the line, "or she'll be a prig and a no-account, brought up here with old folks. I wonder if she'll try the loom-room!"

CHAPTER XXI

NOTHING HAPS TO FEARLESS FEET

TWO days passed, but no fitting opportunity offered itself for the exploration, though Joan had made full survey of the region, and the means by which she might reach her desire. The influenza, settled by now in nerve and limb, confined its captive abed, the various remedies of liniment and drug somewhat easing the irritation of mind as well as of body, giving a measure of release to Joan from the constant attention required during its opening inroads; though he never wanted her to be out of sound of his call.

She was beginning to despair of a fit occasion for her exploit, when on a Friday afternoon while Phoebe was upstairs putting the finishing touches to sweeping-day, up drove two men to see the Stipendiary. Prisoned with womenfolk all the week, as Uncle Garret expressed it, he gladly welcomed the advent of the men, and sick though he was, propped up in bed by pillow and chair, gave himself over to expounding the statutes concerning boundary fences and trespassers thereon and thereof, dismissing Joan from the wing rooms with short ceremony.

It was her chance, and next best luck to having a chance is having sense enough to know it when it comes, and to use it. Joan had both. She slipped out through the long entry, heard the heavy tread overhead on housekeeping tasks intent, and thus assured of freedom both from above and below, hurried out the side door and around to the portion of the house where was her own chamber, and the loom-room under the sloping roof beyond.

Phoebe, fixing a balky blind at one of the windows, let it

suddenly fall to the floor in her surprise and satisfaction at the sight that met her eyes. From the bow-sweet apple tree whose branches overhung the milk-house Joan was climbering upon the milk-house roof, and from thence up on the slanting one of the ell that formed the wing rooms.

Phoebe's own route had been a shorter, safer way, by ladder, direct to the sloping one above the goal, but she had not vouchsafed that bit of information, so Joan had been forced to chart out her own more perilous one, and with steady head she clambered up the steep shingly slope, on all fours like a cat. At Phoebe's last glimpse she was resting upon the summit board of the roof above her desired haven, ready for the short and steep descent to the skylight upon the other side. "It's a ticklish job to stop yourself in time," quoth Phoebe to herself in half compunction, "and she may come to grief, but she doesn't look afraid, and as a rule nothing haps to fearless feet. The best way to get out of trouble is not to get into it, but she's more than half way there now, and I guess I've no call to help her. She must learn to look out for herself."

The skylight had a narrow cleat below it which served as brace, and Joan's feet struck it fair. So far, so good. The outer window for storm protection, projecting over the inner, yielded easily to her grasp and swung back like a trunk cover upon its hinges. The inner one, evidently not repaired when Halfway had been reopened, having rotted away from its fastening, yielded as readily, opening square against the outer sash.

Joan peered down, the bright hot sunlight above her making the interior below seem almost black. But gazing intently, with cupped hands to shade the brightness, she suddenly laughed aloud with relief and glee, for directly below her sight was a chair with box atop it.

Of course, or how else could stout Phoebe have mounted again to the skylight on her passage out! And Phoebe had known it was there, placed by her own hands, but had not told—O, that was just like Phoebe, Joan thought. And it

would be nice if she was here again, now, for it still looked dark within the space below. But to give it up, with the corn and the wine almost in grasp was not to be even considered, so down she dropped, holding tight by the frame above, just for one scary awful minute as she swung there wondering if something would clutch her by her toes out of that black well into which she was plunging. Nobody clutched her; her swaying feet found the prop below; steadied themselves upon it, and with a jump from off it she was safe within the old room.

It was a large, rough, plastered chamber, half of its ceiling sloping almost to Joan's height, the walls from thence down enclosing a long closet under the eaves, the whole length of the place, with several doors for entrances. She looked within, spider-webs festooned it, big round band-baskets sat upon the floor, and heaped in piles and stacks were books and pamphlets, rich prizes for a Dominion antiquarian.

Joan was an opportunist by nature. "Those missing Belcher Almanacs!" thought she, recalling the unavailing search for them in Uncle Garret's closets. If she could find those copies he wanted so badly, it might atone for her thus breaking into the old place; though now was no time for searching them out, if she wanted to explore the room throughout.

It was darker than she had thought, for her eyes were not yet focused to the gloom. And were those things the looms, that Phoebe said were so big and black that they ate up the light! It almost made them seem alive, and terrible, and she approached them with reluctance, great dark beamed structures, two of them, one much larger and higher than the other, and a long seat in front of each. She got up upon the seat of the big old one and stretched her feet down upon the treadles, reaching up her eyes to the threads that led down from the yarn beam; dusty they were, a swirl of it around each, like a wrapping. She blew sharp breaths up them, and it flew off, and she stripped her fingers down them till they

showed bright hued against their old dark reels that framed them in.

And below was cloth, a roll of it, dust covered also, thickly as the threads, but a brush of her hand and sleeve swept it clear and it glowed and gleamed like the yarns above, except that in it was the sober woof across. What beautiful colours! For her eyes, now grown used to the dim light could see them plain—browns, and blues, and greens like growing grass.

How did it go! What made it work! Wouldn't she love to learn how to do it! Cousin Louisa had told Aunt Hetty she ought to teach her— And Phoebe had said her grandmother, one of the other Joans, was a great hand at it. But what was it about it being unlucky! If her grandmother had woven it when a young girl, as Phoebe had said, how old the cloth must be, and she wished she could see it spread out, but though she tugged at the cloth beam it did not budge at the pressure.

She jumped down and went over to the smaller one across the room, but no piece was set upon it. That must be the one Louisa had said she could learn on. O, but she liked that big old one best! When Aunt Hetty came back she would ask her all about it. Perhaps she shouldn't really have come here till Aunt Hetty had said she might. But she was here, now, so what was the use of worrying! And what a wonderful place it was. Here were two doors, and she turned and shook their knobs but got no entrance through, for they were evidently locked and no keys were in them. Where did they lead to, perhaps one of them into her own bedroom, though there was no door there that she had ever seen except the ones to the closets and hall.

Then she remembered the picture Phoebe had told her of, and she looked around the walls. Some colour prints were there, pinned and tacked in irregular fashion; one of a troubador under his sweetheart's window picking his guitar; another of a gipsy troop halting for noon-day rest under the shadow of a wayside Cross, the women with kerchiefs spread

across their faces as they tipped back in repose against the stone, the men and children stretched below out of the sun's rays; a tiny dark framed one of the Princess Royal with up-raised parasol; and others beside, but none of Uncle Garret.

Phoebe must have been mistaken. And then she gasped in wonder, for coming in her survey to the wall behind the big old loom she saw hanging upon it directly under the Catherine-wheel window, a picture of a girl about her own age, and a boy a bit older, standing by a draped curtain of blue, their eyes looking straight to her glance. The western lights from the slanting window panes above threw a lambent ray upon it so that it stood out distinct from the dark wall behind, making the figures seem alive and aglow, one of those fine portraits of Valentine's when he painted in old Halifax in Garret Wisdom's youth.

The small oval face that met Joan's sight each day in the swivel mirror atop her high bureau, was not more like her own than this one of the girl that now confronted her astonished gaze. And the boy beside her—was it Uncle Garret, that fine faced youth with his arm thrown in fond protecting guise upon her shoulder—O, what a wonderful, beautiful Uncle Garret! and yes he did have a look like Pelig, if Pelig had been groomed as well.

But who was the girl beside him? The grandmother Joan, perhaps, who Phoebe said looked a picture as she sat weaving at the loom, dressed always in bright colours. Yes, she had on a gay frock now, of cherry, which glowed luscious next the curtain's folds of blue. Joan looked and looked, thinking it out. Why would such a beautiful picture be away off up here? It had a frame like the other big ones in the drawing-room, and the two smaller ones of Uncle Garret's parents in his own rooms. Had it ever been down there with those others?

But the time was passing, she would not dare stay much longer. What else was there to see, and she turned away

from the winsome Two upon the wall. Those big round rimmed things must be what Phoebe called the spinning wheels. Joan whirred their broad bands of shining deal, and turned the spinning swifts that stood beside them. Across a longer bench were hanging soft grey strands of wool, what had been round and fluffy rolls but now hung tattered and stretched with the weight of Time's long years upon their soft spirals. Queer teethed bars there were, like huge brushes, that pricked to touch—quill patterned birchins full of slender box-wood shuttles wrapped close with their winded woof. What a treasure-house it was going to be if ever it should be opened up free to her. Why had it been closed, was there some mystery about it?

A pink and gold flash from the dropping sun suffused the place, filtering through the bright hued yarns upon the big loom, lighting up the Two in the picture till they seemed like living breathing beings, inmates with her of the old room. Joan climbed again upon the long seat, her young slim arms reaching across the breast beam and stealing up and down the gay strings as if it were a lyre to touch. But no sound came forth to tell her how her own life's threads were tangled and inextricably woven with the Joan of the picture and those other Joans beyond and between.

"O, I hope Aunt Hetty will truly let it be opened up! But I'll never, never stay out of the lovely old place even if I have to get into it this way every single time," thought she. And the very last look as she clambered out was for the Uncle Garret of the painting, so straight and young and handsome—a new picture of him to put next that one she had hidden away in her heart of the little motherless boy, dwelling upon them, with brooding love, while with careful step she mounted her prop, and climbed outside the window with feet secure upon the cleat of wood below it; up to the summit ridge, down with sure but fearful steps the slope below; across the wing room roofs with soft tread lest the sound should penetrate

within; over once more to the milk-house with its o'er hanging trees; and safe to the ground again.

"My, but 'twas great! I just guess Phoebe will know now that I'll take a dare. And she has got to tell me every single thing about it all, too," said Joan.

CHAPTER XXII

"DO WHAT YOU SET OUT TO DO"

BUT just as Joan had turned the corner to the lane she heard her name called, not Uncle Garret's shrill summons, but Phoebe's crisp sounding one, and hastening to her found to her dismay that Phoebe had been suddenly sent for, to go to the Corner, to sit out the time with a sick person until doctor and nurse should arrive.

"I've made most of the supper ready, in the pantry. Your Uncle would have me get him up, but he's all right except what I can do when I get back, which may be early and may be late," said she. "He's too weak to be towering mad, for he's clear beaten out, wasn't fit to see a baby, let alone men on business, and we'll likely have our hands full with him to-morrow, for a setback is always worse than a poor start."

"O, Phoebe!" cried Joan in disappointment dire that she could not outpour her experiences. "I did go up there, and now I can't tell you about it."

"O, well," commented Phoebe cooly, concerned with her own departure, since the man was waiting with reins up-gathered. "What isn't worth keeping wasn't worth getting. If you're shy about staying alone get Pelig to stop up at the house this evening." And by this time Phoebe's hat was fixed secure, and she was ready for away.

Joan watched the waggon disappear down the long lane. The sun went behind a cloud, and a dark shadow fell from the pines upon the big grey house. Phoebe might be prickly and blunt, as she undoubtedly was, and Phoebe might be bluff and scornful at times, but nevertheless just to see her around anywhere lent an air of safety and assurance, and Halfway

seemed to loom lonesome with her comfortable capable presence gone from out it.

But there were chickens to feed; Uncle Garret's, and her own and Pelig's supper to spread and serve, and all that delightful chamber of mystery to think upon besides, so Joan's spirits rose.

From the invalid there was no special fault finding. He seemed utterly weary, abstracted, too, making no talk except to express satisfaction at his tormentor's temporary absence. "She is that aggravating and aggressive with her wagging tongue and tyrant ways that I never know whether I'm afoot or a-horseback when she's around," said he, as Joan set his tray before him and placed upon the stand his fresh filled jug of water. And when he had partaken thereof and was dozing over his pipe, the one time when he needed no "company" and seldom even an errand, Joan ate her own meal, spread upon the table in the big dining room, Pelig not appearing for his, though she had waited long past the usual hour.

Had he come, Joan would have been sore tempted to tell about her recent adventure, for the hazard of it had set her pulse aglow, and the treasure-room at the venture's end had been almost like finding the pot of gold at the rainbow-tip. Nor did she see him at the spring later on, when she went for the night's fresh pail. Often he was going down the road at that hour and would turn at sight of her to carry up to the garden gate her brimming bucket; on her questioning would tell her what had been his tasks through the long day just shut off behind the high hills.

Sometimes she had a book from Halfway book-shelves for him. He read with slowness, not being at school many months of his life, but read with avidity and understanding, and Joan often wished he could have been free to enter the wing room where hung the shelves, to choose for himself, instead of taking only what she had been reading. But the Master of Halfway rarely bade him inside when he came for his day's directions. He took his orders or reported upon

the progress of previous ones, usually standing, or if a longer interview was necessary, sitting upon the wooden settle just beside the door.

The Master of Halfway was jealous of his books. There were not many, for in the old days when his father and grandfather lived within its walls, reading matter was scarce in that new country. There was a Byron and a Burns, a Milton in verse and prose, Shakespeare and the Lake Poets —Swift, and Homer—and volume upon volume of history and Penny Magazines, with two long shelves of miscellaneous titles from which Joan cold cull both travel and story. All these were in their place before Halfway had been closed, and upon Garret Wisdom's return the passion had been not for books, but lands. When he wished to read, these old ones sufficed him; and the "Sets" that adorned most of the other houses were lacking here, for Uncle Garret could scent a book agent afar off, and assuredly he did not fall upon his neck with a subscription. The "Free Press" for the doings of the countryside, "Harper's Weekly" for across the border, with the "London Times" and the old "Nova Scotian" under its new name for Capital news, kept him up with his own and the big world's doings, and thus not glutted with overmuch information he turned over in his own mind the various questions of the day, arriving at his own conclusions and rendering his own decisions. Woe be to the untoward man who attempted to do Uncle Garret's thinking for him. That was why he quarrelled so with the "Free Press." —it was dogmatic in its statements.

Joan had a Marco Polo volume for Pelig to-night, and "The Tale of a Tub," which last she had not herself yet read, but it had a bright red cover, and large print, and in its title suggested an everyday atmosphere. Always she had to select in a hurry lest she might be forbidden. He had asked her to bring him two books, so that he could keep one in his room and the other where he worked. But he was nowhere in sight, though he had seemed so eager to have them, so Joan

came up the path slowly, the glamour of her afternoon's adventure fading, and the loneliness of everything settling down upon her; pausing just a moment at the bed of ribbon-grass, as she often did if not in great haste, to strip the cool striped strands through her fingers. Somewhere down the road, probably from the children at the farmhouse, an alder whistle sounded forth its clear fifing call, and Joan wished she could answer it, or had somebody to talk with, or that she could go to the Island again, or see Lisbeth, or anything but spend alone the long evening ahead.

Uncle Garret had smoked out his pipe when she reached the house, and was full awake from out its dozing dreams. "Jo-ann," he called, as she came up the steps. And he said it with the Ann long drawn, and sharp. The girl's sentient ear caught the special tone, and felt the presage of conflict ahead. When she entered the room she saw that he had pushed over his chair to an opened window, noticing with astonishment the unwonted effort and its accomplishment, the rugs that had spread the floor in his progress crumpled or flung aside.

"Do you hear a noise, Jo-ann?" he asked, his face turned toward the open casement.

Joan approached, and stood alert for an instant, listening, then shook her head at his questioning glance.

"Don't wag your head for answer," said he. "That's all a jackass can do. The Almighty gave you a tongue. Use it when I speak to you. Do you hear a noise, Jo-ann?"

Just the veriest curve of that crooked smile showed at Joan's lips as she thought and longed to dare say, as well, that he was talking so loud and rapping with his cane so hard that nothing could be heard beside. But she did not say it, bending her head instead, obedient to his command, listening intently.

"Well, what do you hear," asked he.

"Nothing."

"Nonsense," replied Uncle Garret, "stuff and nonsense!

You couldn't hear 'nothing.' There are plenty of noises about to hear, all the ordinary ones; but there is a rumbling rushing sound besides, in the air somewhere, for several nights past. I notice it distinctly after you are abed and Phoebe's clacking has ceased."

"Perhaps it might be the cold, settled in your ears, Uncle Garret."

He stamped his foot with rage upon the floor, his cane as well. "I did not ask you *what* it was!" he shouted, "I asked you only if you heard it. Do you?"

"There's something that sounds like the mill does when it's running," said she presently.

"Well, why not have said so at first, and saved our words!"

"But how could it be the mill? For that stops at six o'clock, and sometimes earlier, Pelig says. Why would it be running now?"

"That is exactly what I want to find out," said he. "Go down the brook path, and up the hill one, until you strike the creek, and from the bend there the mill is in plain view. If you stand there, in the elder-clump, you can see whatever is going on and yet not be seen yourself. If it is anybody working the mill, find out who it is. This is my 'turn,' and no one else has a right at it day or night, for I have a big cut to be sawn. Hurry away or it will be getting dark."

Joan was aghast. "Why, it's almost dark now," she said, "in the woods."

"Afraid, are you?" he queried. "Don't be a child. You are old enough to carry through a simple thing like that."

"But before I could get back it would be really dark, wouldn't it?"

"What is to hurt you in Halfway woods this time of night?" asked he in kinder tone. "They're not thick enough to harbour a wild beast; not even a screech-owl would stay in their scant shelter at such an early hour. Hurry, and be off."

She moved slowly toward the door, reluctance in every

footstep, but said never a word. And he could not but note it, the shadow over the sweet serious face that she turned toward him in mute protest at his stern demand. He changed his tactics, taking her into half confidence.

"See here," said he, "somebody lately has been robbing my timber-lands, and I think it likely that the same parties may be stealing my 'trick' at the saw-mill, for the creek is lower than it's been for many years, already, and there'll soon be no water to cut with, unless we've heavy rains. Nick Conners lost his own turn and he is likely trying to outwit me by taking night shifts out of mine; the whole family is a band of thieves, and once I catch him they'll be made to suffer. You understand, do you? I want you to go at once. You need to do daring things. You must not grow up soft, and a ninny, afraid of everything unusual."

Something within surged to the sting, and before she had thought of the consequences she brought her afternoon's sortie to refute the accusation. "I'm not a ninny. I was up in the old loom-room, to-day," said she in splendid vindication of her assertion.

The long pipe he held in his hands fell to the floor, shattered in a dozen pieces, and he turned quick to the wall above his desk where hung his ring of keys.

Joan's glance following his, caught its import. That must be the key to the room, that long heavy one that had often met her eye, like the one in her own lock. And suddenly she saw in this thing that she was told to do a means to her great desire, and quick as her thought of it, spoke it out. "If I go," said she, "will you give me the key and let me have that room opened up?" And then she trembled at her bold request, as well she might, for a thunderous "No" fell upon her startled quivering senses.

"No," repeated he. "But how did you get there this day?"

"I climbed up by the roofs, to the skylight, and——"

"Be gone," said he, "and do your errand!" And she went out from his presence.

The summer sun was an hour down behind the hills, the dusk of early evening already beginning to fall upon the landscape. Joan hurried along the roadway till she struck the pastures, wide and free and open, the path from there on entering the light woods beyond the brook. It was not a way she often had gone, though plain to follow; but the gloom of the hemlocks and the sombre pines, young growth even that they were, "ate up the light," like the old looms in the dark chamber, and there seemed no outlet ahead.

Her sleeve caught on a protruding branch, and startled her as if it had been a hand stretched out to seize. A sound as of approaching voices fell upon her ears. Her feet stumbled upon some protruding roots, she fell prone, and rising missed the pathway beyond, stunned, confused. A sudden fright assailed her, unreasonable, for the woods was but a few yards through, when she would have been out in the open again; but the fear was uncontrollable, it mastered her, and she turned and fled back to the big grey house, and burst in upon the old man, sitting still by the window, his head bowed upon his heavy cane.

"O, I can't do it," she cried, leaning back against the door, breathing fast, and half ashamed, yet pleading and fearful. "It's growing dark already, and I heard——" But he interrupted her, his ears and eyes deaf to her entreaty.

"Always do what you set out to do," said he, "if it is within your strength, and within reason, and this is well within both, for it is not yet night and you have no just cause for fear. To fail yourself now, and by your own fault, will confront you whatever else you undertake, and be a snare to your feet. Go finish what you started out to do, Jo-ann, do you understand?"

She understood, and without a word, but with head held high, went out from him once again.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE MYSTERY OF THE MILL

THE light was fast waning when Joan emerged from out the hemlock wood. She did not know whether she had been afraid, or not, for she was angry, a passion of temper against the great-uncle who had forced her to go upon his errand—a hot childish resentment and yet an older indignant wrath which covered all the days of his moods when he had provoked her young heart to rebellion by his irritating furious speech and his haughty assumption of his right to bully and bluster them all.

Thus her anger swallowed up her fears, and she sped across the lowlands, by now engulfed in a silver haze so airy and yet so dense that the brook's babbling murmur from out it had a strange and eerie call; up onto the higher ground where in the early descending dews sweet fern and brake were pungent with fragrance, and the young slender birches pallid against the on-coming dark, like wraiths. Straight down the hill she passed, hugging in close against the old snake-fence that she might seek quick cover within its sheltering angles were she observed; then across to the elder-clump where peering from its quick shelter she could see down the creek to the mill-bank. Uncle Garret had been right in his surmise. The mill was going full blast!

Years added to years had taken many tallies from Time and worn out many perishable things, but this old saw-mill on the creek falls, erected in Garret Wisdom's youth, had not been changed in form nor in its manner of propulsion. A long shed-like building it was, battened with slabs, jutting

out over the stream that drove the simple machinery of its single saw, a company-mill, that sawed only for its owners' necessities, each part holder drawing by lot early in the season what was called his trick or turn, running it for himself alone; often when the water was falling low working it night and day to get his required output.

"Gang" and "rotary-mills" there were in other parts of the county, and a big lumber company operating not far distant, but what cared they in the Wisdom neighbourhood where they lived out their lives as they had begun, prosperous, complacent and high minded. If the company-mill, primitive though it be, furnished lumber enough for needed repairs or additions, why put up another, for save a barn here and there, or an added window or porch to the comfortable old residences constructed so solidly and amply from the heavy timbers of the early days, no new buildings had been erected for many a year.

This season, to Garret Wisdom had fallen the last lot, and though he schemed for exchange with each of the others, chafing under the stroke of fate that compelled him to wait their time through, a grim and good-natured sense of unusual justice meted out made them unresponsive to his approaches, some few who had been oppressed as to mortgage and boundary fences feeling it a distinct and overt acknowledgment of equity that he should be thus last instead of first. But his turn had finally come round, Pelig, with another "hand" beside, carrying on the labour; while up at Halfway the Master fumed and fretted lest he be defrauded of his usual output, since the low falling creek gave sign of an idle mill-wheel all too soon.

Yet here was the mill, at night time, running full speed! Joan stole from out the sheltering clump for a better view. Within the old structure, hung against the low walls opposite the saw-gates, two lanterns were burning, lighting up the rough space, their gleam shining out in prisms upon the white broken water that dashed from under the whirring

wheel and folded over the rocks below and twisted in and out the eddies.

At the farther end a man was moving about, hewing and turning a log for the saw. Presently he hoisted the gate and took his seat upon the log and she could hear the crunch crunch of the blade as it crept closer and closer to him in its slow course through the timber. Uncle Garret's trick it was, and yet somebody was without doubt using up his run, and probably his logs as well.

Joan had seen the Conners' men only once, and it was hard to distinguish faces in the strange light diffused through the forest gloom, so she stole still nearer, clear out from her covert, watching for the man upon the ways to move. And when he rose, his face turned full toward the open end, she cried out with sudden relief from her tensioned fear and sight, for it was only Pelig, good, awkward, red-headed Pelig! And all Uncle Garret's suspicions and anger had been for naught! He was probably hurrying up the work because of the low run of water, and with the sudden sight of him, the familiar face instead of all the eerie shapes and sounds along her dreaded way, the relief was so great that she forgot her instructions as to secrecy and called aloud his name.

He had risen to adjust the log and was standing looking down upon the swirl of waters. At her first uttered exclamation when she recognised him he stood in amazement at sight of her there alone at such a time, but at her call of his name he stopped the machinery and hurried across the little footbidge to where she stood.

"Anything the matter up at the house?" he asked.

"No," answered Joan, "but," and then an awkward pause fell between them, for suddenly she was troubled to know if she should tell Pelig what errand her Uncle had sent her there upon.

But he did not wait for further words. "What made you come?" he asked. "It's the night the miners go through this way after their pay, a rough crowd they are, mostly foreign

ers, and half an hour ago you would have been right in among them. They go through the elder-clump always."

Her face paled as she remembered the voices in the hemlock woods.

"What did you want? Phoebe could have come with you."

"She's not there," said Joan. The Parkers are sick. She had to go stay with them till the doctor could come. And Uncle Garret—and I—we thought we heard the mill running—and I came down to see if it really was."

A quick suspicion came to the youth, born of his knowledge of the stern master. "Did Mr. Wisdom send you here for that?"

Joan scarce knew what to answer. To Pelig she had never herself spoken of her Uncle's tyrannical ways, sharers though they often had been of his displeasure in times when, the whole household arraigned, the storm would burst upon both the unjust and the just. And she had an indefinable feeling that even now angry though she was at the task imposed upon her, she should not lower him in Pelig's esteem. But, struggling with this was a sudden shy consciousness that Pelig might think she was a bold girl, and had come of her own will to the mill to seek him out. So where should the honour lie, with herself, or the stern old Uncle who had forced her thither?

Pelig's bulky awkward frame sheltered an honest heart of gold, and though he did not dismiss his suspicion of the Master, he felt there was something he did not fully understand. Rough clad he was, yet a chivalrous gentleman in intent, eager to make her not only safe, but at her ease as well.

"Guess I'd better tell you what's up, here at the mill," said he. "I'm sawing for myself, my own logs, and I reckoned it was no harm to make use of the power a few hours at a time, since it would go to waste otherwise. That night after the party, the Postmaster sent for me, and offered me a lot of stray logs there were lying round his timber land way up the creek, said I was welcome to them if I could get them out,

and thought they'd bring me in quite a bit, since he knew a purchaser for me. It was mighty fine of him, and I've been working at it, odd hours; these moonlight nights were great to get them down stream.

"I calculated I'd ask a chance at the mill after the Squire's trick was through, since everybody else has had their cut out, but the creek is running low and the weather so hot and dry that I'm afraid the power'll be clear gone, so I'm just taking night time for it, cheating nobody, but myself out of my sleep, and I'll make up for that in the winter like the bears do. I couldn't stand it to lose the first real chance I ever had to make anything over and above wages. It's sold already, and I can run it down single, if the water's too low to raft it. I planned to let him know when it was all done, but you can tell him now, if he sent you down to find out."

Joan did not answer that, for she had already made her decision as to where the honour lay, both here and when she should return to Uncle Garret to render up her account. "I think it's splendid for you having a chance," she said; "you know in the books it's always some chance like this that starts you on, and maybe this is yours, Pelig. If it was daytime I'd like to see the mill working, but I think I'll have to hurry back now."

"Just what I was thinking myself. I'd like you to see them, they're whoppers of boards, but it mightn't be the right thing to have you looking around the mill alone," said Pelig, awkward and honest-hearted.

They had not met before save in the common household interest, and seeing her thus it came to him sharp how separate would be their ways through life, so dainty and fair and sweet she looked to him, standing at the edge of the elder-clump, so removed from his rough garb and labourer's ways. She should never have been sent out unprotected, so far from Halfway call, for though she had not said so in words he felt confident that she had been an unwilling messenger.

"I'll go back with you till you strike the pasture lands,"

said he, "if you mind the dark, for it's falling fast, though the moon'll be up in no time now; she's just showing above the clouds there."

"O, I wish you would," said Joan. "But you'll lose a lot of time from your sawing, Pelig, to come all the way, so if you would only just stand here till I get really through the woods part, you could hear me if anything was wrong, for it's so still here; and O, there's the moon now, and it won't be bad at all. Please, Pelig, just do that and I'll feel better than if you came the whole way."

"I'll do that, and glad," assented he, with fine perception sensing that she might be reluctant to be walking out alone with him. So she started away, and he stood where she left him until she had entered the hemlock woods, then quietly followed her, but afar, lest he should disturb her by a foot-fall, though close enough to protect had aught affrighted. When she was out of the silver mist and up on the pasture lands in sight of Halfway, he returned to the mill to work with redoubled speed; no sleep till morn for him, this night, for now that the Squire would know his venture there would be a sudden end to its continuance, and to-night would be his last. He would work all its hours through till the Master's labours began next day, and if he worked fast, and surely, might finish his cut. So pulling up the best of the logs he hoisted the flood-gate for increased power and set himself to the race.

Meanwhile, though neither he nor Joan had known it, they had been both observed and followed, and by no less a personage than Phoebe, who relieved of her watch earlier than she had anticipated, was making return to Halfway. She had just struck off from the road when she heard the noise of the mill, and skirting the wood to find out who was driving it after hours, to her amazement saw Joan creep out to the creek's bank, and Pelig cross over to meet her.

The harsh castigation of a motive, and the imputation of it, sprang quick to her lips. "Out meeting Pelig, nights, is

she, and I thought there was danger of her being staid and lonely!"

They were too distant to overhear their conversation, so she waited in concealment to observe their movements. If Garret had been taken suddenly worse, or anything was wrong up at the house, Pelig would be accompanying her back, thought Phoebe as she watched them, but after a few minutes' speech together Joan started away alone and Pelig remained behind. So Joan was not exonerated on that score.

Phoebe hurried on through the wood and took the road again for a bit, until Joan should get a good start ahead. The mill running, after hours, with Pelig in charge and Joan stealing down alone through the woods to meet him there, was food for thought; yet she was loth, too, to believe ill of either, for Pelig had strongly appealed to her affections, and the girl herself, shy and proud though she seemed at times, was most lovable and friendly when she broke through her reserve, and Phoebe had begun to incline her heart toward her.

"Well, with both of them away from Halfway, Garret's been left alone," thought she, "and there'll be something to pay when she gets back, or my name's not Phoebe Shields. I'll wait under the back window of the rooms to see how she meets it."

Joan, crossing the pasture lands, had no fears now, for the house was in plain sight, with nothing between to cause her dread. Pelig's homely reassuring manner and the story of his project had dissipated her fearful imaginings. But her heart was still hot with anger at the old Uncle who had sent her upon her unwilling way. She felt, yet, the awkwardness of it with Pelig, and wondered what he thought of her coming thither. And if she should have been overtaken by those miners! A rough and boisterous lot they were on this off night, usually drinking, Pelig had said. What a cruel thing it was to put her thus in peril of them, and only her return to

the house, in that first fear, had saved her from the encounter.

Down at the mill too—what would she have done if there had been strange men operating it, and they had caught her spying upon them? What could she have said to them? Why would Uncle Garret not have thought of those things himself, and shrink from exposing her to danger, instead of subordinating everything and everybody to his own desires and his own will, ruling at Halfway with an iron hand! And she mounted the verandah steps a slim, defiant little figure and entered the wing rooms, every intolerant fibre of her being up in arms against the injustice of it all.

Uncle Garret was sitting where she had left him. Sometimes if mortally weary he would tumble himself off upon the couch, where under coverlet he could wait in comfort until made ready for sleep upon his bed, and Joan knowing how cramped he had been with pain through the day, expected to find him there; but he evidently had not even essayed to move, for his chair still stood in front of the opened window.

He seemed to be watching from out it through the dusk, his head bent forward, and as Joan entered the room he turned quickly toward her, evident relief upon his countenance. "Well, who was it?" he asked. But she did not answer him.

"Did you get close enough to see the men?"

"Yes," answered she, niggardly of words, as yet, while gathering her forces for her spring.

"Do you know who is working it, Jo-ann?"

"Yes, I know who it is, Uncle Garret."

"Hoity, toity!" exclaimed he, "what are you after, mincing your words like an attorney's clerk in the witness box. Answer my question, Jo-ann. Who was driving the mill?"

And then came her charge, and it was strange to note in her speech, though in a lesser degree, that same dominant determination of the great-uncle.

"I'm not going to tell you, Uncle Garret," said she. "You could make me go, spying for you, because you say I

am adopted and that you have a right over me. And I did go for you, but the one who is running the mill isn't cheating you out of anything that is really yours, and I'm not going to tell on him. To send a girl down there alone, when it's the night the miners go through on shift! And they were drunk!"

The great-uncle's stern face twitched with sudden emotion, and shadowed in fear, as his old eyes fell upon her, her slight childish form, the sweet face with the blue eyes shining from out it like jewels. What could she have done if surrounded by that rough mob, to meet their gay and ribald banter, even though they had not sought to harm her! And the dried out fountains of tender chivalry sprang up afresh within him at the thought.

"Jo-ann," said he, "I hope I am a gentlemen whatever else I am, or am not, and I beg your pardon, Jo-ann for exposing you to such a danger."

She did not stir, nor speak in answer.

"You heard me, Jo-ann. There is only one person more unworthy than he who will not make an apology and that one is he who will not accept it." But still she made him no reply.

"You may go up to your chamber," said he, "and we will talk it over in the morning. But you could easily have turned back when you heard their voices, Jo-ann."

And then the anger burst forth, like lightning flash and crash of thunder. "I did come!" she cried. "I came back, but you sent me out again, and would not even let me tell you about it. And the only reason I didn't really have to meet them was because I *was* afraid; for they passed through the little woods just before I got down to the elders. You wouldn't let me tell you about it, and sent me back as if I was a coward, but I'm not that. It's only because I never was out in the woods at night, and they seem so big, and you can't see plain, and all the queer sounds in them. I don't mean to stay frightened of them all my life, though; I'm going to

get over it as fast as I can. And I'm not a coward, for there's one thing I am not afraid of—and that's you, Uncle Garret."

He struck sharp with his stick upon the floor, but she gave him no heed.

"I've never had anybody to really love me in all my life, but I've never had anybody be afraid of me, like everybody is of you. To make a girl go down alone at night through the woods,—to spy out for you at a mill where men are working!" And she passed proudly by him, her face averted, and went out of the room and up the long stairs to her chamber.

She thought she heard a mocking laugh float out the entry and up the winding stairs, something like Phoebe's scornful one, but Phoebe was not yet back, and it must have been his. It hardened her young heart yet more. He had tyrannised over her, had humbled her before Pelig, had subjected her to danger, and now he laughed at her! O, how could he! And she climbed up into the high wing-chair and shut her eyes tight, but could not shut out the sight of that forbidding countenance, nor the sound of the mocking laugh. She had never seen him look as he had this night—so grey and drawn, and yet so hard and merciless. Perhaps he would send her away altogether from Halfway. If he did she was glad she had dared to speak out her mind to him to show him she was not a coward.

But presently another face shadowed that stern harsh visage, and she saw the radiant youthful form of the loom-room portrait, the glance bent so tender upon the sister by his side, the arm protectingly about her.

And back yet farther, the picture Aunt Hetty's words had drawn, of a little motherless fellow with nobody to pray for him. They pleaded for him now, the youth and the child.

The mocking laugh died away; the stern-featured face faded from before her eyes; and she slipped from off her chair, and passed down the winding stairs, and along the dim lighted entry way to his rooms.

The door was ajar, as she had left it, and the old Uncle

still sat in his chair before the window, the soft moon beams his only light. A breeze had sprung up from the east, it fluttered out the white curtains, and she could feel its chill breath even from the doorway. How careless she had been to leave him sitting there, for he could not rise to close it, and Phoebe was evidently not yet back.

She pushed open the door, slipped past behind his chair and shut out the cold blast; in return pausing for a moment upon the threshold, with a way she had on entering or leaving a room, a beautiful grace of motion like a bird a-poise in mid-air before its nest, all unconscious herself of the attitude, or that it had come down to her from those other Joans of the long ago.

But the old Uncle knew the movement, and he looked up at her involuntarily, despite his displeasure, for he had observed it when first she came to Halfway, and had grown to watch for it—his mother's and his sister's very posture.

Standing there, as he looked upon her, she met fair his glance; then with a way that was nobody's but her own she blew him a kiss from her fingers, and fled again to her chamber. For Joan could resent an imposition, and Joan was valiant to fight, but the one thing she could not do was to cherish a resentment or to brood upon her anger.

"If, when I wake in the morning, I'm sorry I said it all," thought she, "then I'll take it for a sign I was wrong, and I'll have to ask his pardon, I suppose. But if I'm not, then I won't!" And hearing Phoebe's heavy tread below, she forgot her cares and fell asleep, in her white bed; that sudden childish impulse of gesture flung at her antagonist in tender gaiety of defiance, dulling for her the sting and the pain of the night's encounter.

CHAPTER XXIV

AUNT HETTY'S HOME-COMING

WHEN Joan was waked by the gold and rosy dawn across her window panes, without knowing at all what she was thinking, her very first thought was that she was glad she had dared to speak to him, for it was one of the things she had set her heart to do, to bring back to every-day Halfway that gay and courtly Uncle Garret of the party, and unless she tried it out, one way and another, how ever could she make it come to pass, thought she. So she took her "sign" and repented not, though still fearful of what interdict might be placed upon her.

One thing sure she determined upon, she would keep the matter to herself—three secrets, Uncle Garret's despatching of her upon his errand, Pelig's project, and her own encounter within the wing rooms upon her return; all unknowing that outside beneath the opened window as she had talked had been ensconced a listener who heard the whole interview, a Phoebe with a meek and contrite heart, ashamed of her suspicions along the forest way, exulting in a militant Joan, and glorying over her triumphant attack.

Such a Joan might be worth having at Halfway, thought Phoebe, and knowing that often a good meal lifts us up and over a hard place, spirit buoyed by body's strength, there was spread for Joan when she came down, such a breakfast as had not met her eyes since that first one that had been made for Phoebe's welcome of the little stranger. And Joan ate, and was comforted, and uplifted, not guessing the reason for it, nor informed, for Phoebe too could keep a secret, and was now nowhere in sight.

When it was time for the water to be brought from the spring, Joan departed on her way, returning with the brimming pail, as usual, and entering the wing rooms said her "Good-morning."

Uncle Garret was propped up in bed, his breakfast tray upon the little stand.

"It's a lovely morning, Uncle Garret," said she. But he answered her never a word.

She took the gay pictured jug and filling it from the pail placed it beside his tray, wondering that he could have drained its contents dry through the night, nearly a gallon it held, and she watched strangely fascinated as he reached eagerly over for his dipper and three times drank it full, something almost pitiful in the stern, handsome old face as he sank back again against his pillow.

It stirred her heart before she was aware. "Uncle Garret," she cried, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry," though she had not meant to say it.

"It is late to be sorry," said he; "I cannot forget it, but I overlook it, because I can forgive a hot tongue from a brave man, and you did the thing you set out to do, not giving in to your fears." He paused for a moment as though to give her chance for answer but she did not speak.

"You were afraid of the dark," said he, "yet did not fear to attack the one who is sheltering you in his home."

She turned away from the room, distraught, not knowing what answer she should make him.

He called her back and she returned.

He took from the nail above his bed the bunch of keys, and separating from the others the big heavy one, slipped it from the ring and passed it over to her.

"It is the key to the loom-room," said he. "Phoebe will help you move the heavy press that has covered the doorway these many years. It is yours, the key and the room, from this day on, and all that in it is."

"O, I don't want it!" she cried. It was like fire upon her

young head, defenceless before his hard merciless manner. Why had she ever dared to cross swords with him, to speak to him as she had! And she did not take the key but clasped her hands behind her, as she stood before him, hot brimming tears splashing upon her cheeks.

He still held out the key. "You bargained for it," said he coolly; "a good business head, I see. And though I did not say it should be yours if you went, yet the going was a tacit pact. Always take what you fairly earn, Jo-ann. The place is yours, but ask me no questions concerning it, nor tell me anything of your searches within it. It holds unhappy memories for me. Take the key, Jo-ann; you understand."

She reached out her hand and took it. And then, as with the kiss blown light from her fingers the night before, she broke the strain.

"Uncle Garret," said she, "it truly wasn't the *real you* I said those awful things to last night, it was just to the Uncle Garret that you make us think you are, the one everybody is afraid of."

"That will do, Jo-ann. When you are entirely sure of your regret I will accept your apology. You may go now," said he. So she left him, the big cold key clasped in her small warm hands.

"Well, that squall's over and nothing blown away," said Phoebe in a hearty voice, joining her in the dim lighted entry way.

"Why, I didn't see you in the room," exclaimed Joan.

"I didn't intend you to. And you didn't see me last night either, when you were having your row out with him. Perhaps you might call it eavesdropping, but I don't, in a case like that, and this, where you might need a champion. The Scriptures enjoin us to hear if we've ears to hear, and what's the good of missing a treat if it falls your way! Now you've got what you wanted, the loom-room opened up."

"But I don't want it now, in the way I got it, Phoebe."

"O, yes, that's how you feel while you're young, but when you're old as I am you will have learned that we seldom get the thing we craved just in the way we craved it. Be glad you got it, and make some use of it, to keep you happy in this big lonely house. Don't trouble your head any more about your uncle. We'll go up and see if we can get inside it right now while I have a few minutes to spare, for I want to give the house a go-over to-day and do a bit of extra baking in case your Aunt Hetty comes back before her time is out."

"Why, Phoebe, everything is just shining clean now, I don't see where you could find one speck of dust in the whole place! I don't believe there ever could be any dirt around where you were."

"Well, there's some right now, in your own chamber here," replied Phoebe, "a roll of lint underneath your big chair, and we'll have to make war on that at once. You get the wing and dust-pan and catch it up quick before it spreads around; dirt attracts dirt, always, like all else that's evil. While you're at that I'll make your bed and then we'll be free to explore."

And Phoebe's stout arms pounced upon the huge feather bed atop the four poster, whopped and walloped and prodded its bulky mass that always seemed so unwieldy to Joan's slight grasp, till the bulging heap spread out level as a board, patting and smoothing it back and forth after the covers were laid upon it, with the long round stick that hung at the bedside.

"There," said she. "'Twas a hillowy and a hollowy mess before I got at it, but 'twill do now. I suppose you're hardly tall enough to get a proper purchase, but keep on trying to do it better each day. I don't like to see anybody knuckle, even to a feather bed. Now, we'll go at the press, and you'll have to lend me a hand at that for it's about three hundred stone, I guess, by the look of it. It's almost the only thing we don't move when we house-clean,

and this chamber of yours was shut up tight till you came and Garret gave orders it was to be opened for you."

Joan lent a hand, and between them they tugged the bulky structure away, all the while her inner consciousness making a mute misgiving that she could not yet put in words, and scarcely herself understood, as if they were someway thrusting aside a veil into a Holy place that she had gotten to herself in a ruthless manner, wrenched from an unwilling hand. But she could not voice it, aware though she was of her spirit's scruple.

"Give us the key," said Phoebe, as the press removed disclosed the low broad door so effectually concealed behind it that Joan had not ever guessed its existence.

The key lay in her small warm grasp, no longer a cold alien substance that chilled her with a portent of stern displeasure from him who had yielded it, but a vital animated thing that was a part of her very self, that was hers alone and hers only, as Uncle Garret had said, a golden enchanted key that would let her in and out that treasure room at her own will. And suddenly as Phoebe reached out and took it from her, fitting and turning it in the ponderous lock, Joan knew that she did not want to enter thus, so boldly and hastily as if breaking through, and she sprang forward and stood with her back against the old portal.

"Phoebe, don't be cross," she pleaded, with voice, and eyes, and every attitude of her small slight form, "but I think I'd like to wait, till Aunt Hetty comes back, perhaps. I feel as if I got it ahead of her, for she promised me she would have it opened up, if she could. And, so I'll not really go inside till she gets back, and you won't mind, Phoebe, will you? We can talk about it, and you can tell me all about the looms and wheels and things, and why it was shut up. You understand, don't you, Phoebe?"

Her kinswoman paced off from Joan, and stood with arms akimbo looking down upon her. "Well, if that's not Wisdom, tooth to toenail! All ready to show you around inside, and

now the door as good as slammed in my face, and you away off to the North Pole again! And after my taking up for you with Garret last night when you were abed and asleep, and another going over I gave him this morning before you were up, or in all likelihood you'd never have had the key at all! As for talking about it, you can do yourself what talking there'll be done, but not to me, for I'm away to my work!" And Phoebe was gone, in dudgeon high from out the chamber.

Joan crept into the wing chair and cried it out, for a little while; the tears that spring so quick in youth, when things are either so black or so bright, and appear to stretch so endlessly on from either.

"I'm bad friends with everybody in the house," she said, ruefully, as bye and bye she wiped her eyes. "Even Pelig won't like me for going down there and spying upon him last night. I'll just have to fix it up though with Phoebe, someway, even if she makes me eat humble-pie," and downstairs she went.

Delicious whiffs were creeping up from the kitchen. Joan followed the scents and found Phoebe in the big pantry, turning out a pan of odd shaped cookies, soft and golden. She leaned her face down against the cook's broad shoulders. "Phoebe, don't be cross," she begged.

The broad shoulders shrugged, and shook aside the leaning face.

"Sorry you signed off, I suppose," sniffed the cooker of cookies. "Want to get into the room, now, likely, and crave company—but I'm engaged, you understand!" the last two words in exact intonation of the stern Uncle's.

"No, I haven't changed my mind about it, Phoebe, but I'm sorry I told you in a way that you didn't like. Sometimes I can't seem to make myself say things the right way. Are you making biscuits too, Phoebe? I don't think even cookies could taste as good as your biscuits do. You don't mind if I stay here a little while, do you? It's awful lonesome up-

stairs, and I'll soon have to go in to read to Uncle Garret."

Phoebe signified by a proffer of a hot cookie that she didn't. Her culinary art was her vulnerable spot, and in the praise of it the atmosphere warmed up a bit.

"That very first day you were here, after I came, I knew I had seen that kind of shaped biscuits and cookies somewhere, and you too, Phoebe, but I couldn't make it come out plain till that day down at the Island when I saw that funny chair-table, and then I knew for sure—"

"You've been to the Island! Well, that's a piece of news, I some way missed," interrupted Phoebe, sitting down, floured hands, rolling-pin and all upon her cooking stool. "Who did you see there?"

"O, both of them, and aren't they the darlingest people?" answered Joan, then remembering all too late the ban Uncle Garret had put upon her lips. Well, she would have to get out of the difficulty now the best she could, and perhaps Phoebe wouldn't really ask much about it—though she might have known better than to think that, for when Phoebe got through with a subject there wasn't usually much left for anybody else to find out. But Joan took her chances on it, for she certainly wasn't going to offend her again, after having only just made her peace.

"Did you remember me being there once when I was here before, Phoebe? It was Lisbeth and me. Mrs. Debbie where I was staying sent us down, and we stayed for dinner, and you were there keeping house for Uncle Amsey and you made biscuits and heart-shaped cookies. Perhaps you may have forgotten it."

"Perhaps so," but her listener knew she had not.

"Do you ever go there now, to bake, Phoebe? I should think they'd like to have some of your lovely cooking. Aunt Orin, you know, looks more like books and things like that."

"O, you can't expect every one to have the same gifts," said Phoebe. "A woman who has held the ferule and speller for fifty years has done more than her share of the world's

work already, without stirring and baking. They have a young girl to help them, and they live plainer than you do at Halfway. Orin would rather read a book than eat her supper, let alone the getting of it, and Amsey is easy going and falls into line with who ever is in command. But that girl of Jane's is lucky to have a home there. I was thinking I might send you down on an errand since you know the road," said she, quite aware of the obstruction but trying Joan out again.

It was a temptation sore, the mention of Lisbeth, and the easy way of getting to see her once again, for Joan had found it hard work to stay away, and to keep from even asking about her or the other dear two in that Island home. But as she had been having a fill of experience in the day just past, she deemed it best to keep in the straight and narrow way for a bit.

"I can't go," she said, "and I'll tell you why, and then I can't tell you any more. Uncle Garret said I was not to go again, and he didn't want me to even talk about it to anybody, but I forgot, and spoke before I thought."

"If I hadn't seen with my own eyes and heard with my own ears what I did last night, I'd say you were frightened and finicky," answered Phoebe, "for the Island folks are your folks, as close as your Uncle Garret is; and to my mind he's no call to forbid you going there even if he is out with them himself. But everybody to his liking. Your Aunt Orin is the ten commandments and the whole moral law as to rectitude, and I suppose you maybe take after her somewhat, though I noticed last night you had enough of Garret's spunk and sparks as well. If you choose to obey him, it's none of my business. Captain Nat is great cronies with Amsey and I get Island news that route, so when you want to know how they're getting on down there you'll know where to come."

"Why, Phoebe!" cried Joan, "here is Pelig coming up the

lane this time of day, and he's running. Would there be anything the matter?"

He was in the kitchen before she could answer, and there was indeed something the matter. Little Aunt Hetty, having had out her visit with triumph and satisfaction, returning several days before her time was really up, had been stricken with paralysis upon the train, almost at her journey's end, and George had shoved along at double the wonted speed of His Majesty's mail to bring the word to Halfway, that the low easy riding phaeton might be sent at once to bring her home.

O, then and there was hurrying to and fro at Halfway. The news struck hard with the Master. He had been thinking of her in her absence, of how many things she did for his material comfort that Phoebe and the others could not; of her quiet and gentle movements; her effectual success when she sometimes essayed to have things her own way; the flowers from the garden that she kept always fresh upon his desk. He had almost always forgotten to thank her for her favours, or to mention his appreciation of her gentle and faithful attentions, because usually there were so many things he wanted to grumble about, that he scarce had time to be gracious.

Also he had been thinking that perhaps he would do differently when she got back, if she got the suit to his pleasure, and that other matter he had desired her to attend to. And there was really no reason for keeping that top-buggy shut away as he had! She might as well have it for use now and then, especially when she went visiting down the river where the strangers there might as well see that Halfway could boast a turn-out ahead of their own. All this, he had been thinking. But here was Aunt Hetty coming back to Halfway paralysed, speechless, they said, and unable to lift hand or foot. It struck the Master hard.

Pelig was sent first to Cousin Louisa, to ask if she would make ready to come over for a few days. And then the phaeton was drawn out, and the Squire's own black horse hitched to it, and Pelig and Phoebe were starting away to

bring back Aunt Hetty, Pelig to drive carefully the spirited steed that stepped so swift and even, and Phoebe's strong arms and broad shoulders to succour and support the stricken one; Joan and Uncle Garret left alone at Halfway until Louisa should arrive.

But just before Phoebe took her seat in the phaeton, she called Joan to her. "Doctor Zebra, from town, and a new special man from Boston are down at the Island to-day," said she. "I had the news from Nat yesterday that they were to come. It's Lisbeth's knee they're fixing up. Amsey and Orin seem terribly sweet on her and they're sparing no money to have her cured. If you hurry down you'll likely catch them before they leave, and they'll come up here to wait upon your Aunt Hetty. So get off quick, and do as you please about telling your Uncle Garret, but don't give it up no matter what he says."

When they had driven away, Joan closed the doors, and went in to the wing rooms. "Uncle Garret," said she, "I am going down to the Island," and she told him the errand.

"Go, and go quickly," said he, with neither question nor comment to stay her.

So fleet flew her young feet over the old grassy road, that she was back before he had even begun to expect her: had seen the dear Uncle and Aunt and been clasped close in their fond embrace; had snuggled down a precious few moments beside Lisbeth lying upon her bed with the ailing knee encased in plaster and support by the doctors who had journeyed so far to help her; had tea and caraway cakes, served in Aunt Orin's plain but stately style in the lovely round parlour upstairs, where were long Valentine portraits like those at Halfway, and beautiful old treasures of cabinet, and trinket, that Joan would fain have lingered to examine had not Aunt Hetty's sorrowful home-coming taken first place in her heart.

"We have hungered for you, my precious," Aunt Orin had said as they walked out down the garden paths, when

Joan was returning. "But it was best not to force your way, it will come around all in good time, I have no doubt. And I like it that you bring no tales to me of Garret or of Halfway affairs. We love our word and our honour, little Joan, better than we do our life, and though you are young yet, and can not fully understand its high import, it makes me glad to see you turning toward it. Keep it for your fire to warm your heart, keep it for your lamp to light your path, keep it for your star to lift your eyes toward—your high honour to your God and to your self. The world and the world's aims will seek to smother your fire, and to put out your light, but the star above their reach is unquenchable. Follow its gleam, and go on in the straight and narrow path of its course, for some there must be to walk it or the way would be lost to mankind."

And Joan, though not having the wise words illumined for her as the older woman had by her long life's experiences, yet reached out toward their import, and as far as her capacity within her lay, dwelt upon them for strength as she sped back over the old road.

CHAPTER XXV

IN THE JOY HER SPIRIT FLED

THEY all felt that Aunt Hetty could not live out the day. So many days she had met at dawn, and seen through to the close, not all of them golden and shining with joy, but most of them content and peaceful, for Aunt Hetty's nature had been an untroubled one—and gently comes the world to those that are cast in gentle mould. But this day that had dawned so clear and glorious, she was not to see through.

It was now three weeks since she had been brought home to Halfway in the shining soft-cushioned phaeton, steadied by Phoebe's strong support, and carried up the long stairs by Cousin Alexander's stout arms to her clover scented chamber. Alexander and Louisa had already arrived when Joan returned from the Island, the awe and the sadness of Aunt Hetty's coming lifted by their presence, for where Alexander and dear Cousin Louisa were, dwelt calm and confidence.

The two physicians who soon followed from the Island had tarried several days within the big house, at the Master's request, sitting at her bedside and doing all within their power for aid, but from the very start they had given no hope of her recovery; her collapse had been complete.

Most all the kindred women had come to proffer their services, and the neighbouring folk beside; that last attention Death ever claims, and receives, because so many of us remember with regret the calls we should have made, the aid we might have given, hastening feverishly to offer before it be yet too late. All had stayed for dinner or tea, and had their visit at Halfway, visits which little Aunt Hetty could

now never pay back. Nor had she apparently even known their presence there, for save a fitful moment or two she had not been conscious, nor uttered a word since her return.

But while these others came and went, Phoebe and Cousin Louisa stayed on, Phoebe in charge of the household affairs, and Louisa in the sick-room. Always there is that one person in every chamber of Death, out of the many who may be about besides, the one who takes the lead; turns the hot pillow, fills afresh the glass upon the stand, smoothes the cold hands outside the coverlet; tells in calm voice the varied and various incidents of other sick beds; keeps the balance to earth, lifts to Heaven, and closes the eyes when comes at last the end.

So frail and small the little Mistress of Halfway looked this morn, lying on the big mahogany four-poster with its canopied top; scarce breathing. Joan had stolen into one of the guest-rooms, where the prized Rising-Sun quilt had been laid when Aunt Hetty had finished its piecing, and had brought it in and spread it upon the sick bed. Its red and gold radiating stripes sent out a warm glow of colour against the snowy coverings; and from the long narrow windows each side the four-poster the elms and maples cast the same lambent light throughout the quiet place.

It was Phoebe who took the sad word to the Master, a quiet, chastened Phoebe, who made only the brief announcement, and came out the wing rooms, leaving him alone with his thoughts.

Presently he called her, and she came back, as quietly.

"Draw me out to the stairs," said he. "I am going up." "No objections!" as Phoebe's surprise showed in face and sudden start. "I have made up my mind, and I want no help, nor onlookers, you understand! I am ready now."

And her tongue and her spirit tamed in this presence of Death, all silently she made clear the pathway for his broad chair, pulled him out, and left him at the foot of the winding stair.

Stealthily, now and then, she stole in through the entry-way, to watch his progress.

Now he was out of his chair upon the lower stair; now a few steps up; now a little farther on; then at the rounding bend, and there because he had to make a hand over turn he was upon his knees, when she looked.

"For all the world like a pilgrim mounting to his shrine," she thought, and vaguely wondered if perchance it might shrive his soul to meet what lay ahead in this sad day.

It must have been full half an hour before he reached the top-most stair, and through all that time had uttered no word, though he must have borne pain terrible and wrenching when rounding round the curves, staying with one hand and the sound leg while he drew up the lame limb to the step above. But he had made no moan.

When he reached the landing on the floor above, he rapped upon the banister, and Phoebe, listening, heard it quick, and carried up his chair, helping him upon it—none too soon, for his face was white and drawn with agony and exhaustion, great beads of perspiration standing out upon his brow and even upon his crippled hands.

"I would scarcely have believed it had you told me he could do it," said Cousin Louisa, when Phoebe went in to take the word to the sick-room while Garret Wisdom rested. "It may do him great harm, but it cannot hurt dear Hetty, for she has hardly breathed to show, since daylight, and is not likely to recognise any of us again, though they often do rally unexpectedly at the last moment. I'll go across in little Joan's chamber and sit while you draw him in. There is nothing to do for her, but some one to be at hand if the end should come, and Garret can stay beside her now."

So Garret Wisdom kept the watch for the messenger who was to come that day to Halfway.

Cousin Louisa went in once to speak with him, but did not remain, for he made no speech beyond the necessary civilities.

The chamber brought back memories to him. It had been

his mother's room when he was a child, before his older days when his parents had gone down to the wing rooms which he now occupied since his crippled condition; and he had never been able to mount the stairs since his wife had chosen this for her own. When he was ailing and needing special attention she remained down to care for him, but usually he wished to be alone, and so she had closed the bedroom occupied when first they came to Halfway, choosing instead this large airy one with luxury of space that satisfied the craving within her, born from out the small cramped quarters of her other homes. The massive bed was in the very centre, and the heavy bureaus and presses were of the same wood, as were the two wing chairs that sat upon either side the windows.

While he thought, back with the past, striving to recall his mother's presence within the place, he watched that small white face upon the pillows, eagerly intent to see if some look of consciousness or recognition would pass across it before she left on her long journey.

On an ottoman almost within reach of his hands was hung her best silk gown, the grey one she had worn at the party, some soft white clothing, and the little shoulder cape with the gay silken fringe that she had liked so well to don, all ready for her robing. Tall spikes of spicy stocks and fragrant phlox were upon the dark old bureaus and on the window sills, all the air sorrowfully sweet with their heavy scent.

Now and again he spoke aloud her name, sharply, because he had not used another tone for so long, the masterful ring in it despite the real concern and compassion that lay beneath, and with an almost impatient note that she did not answer his call.

Such a seamed and wrinkled little face, the one he watched, the lines deep and crossed and showing thus plain because there was neither speech, nor glance of eye, to relieve or mask; the weeks of pain beside, adding to their depth.

Toward late afternoon she seemed to stir, and the husband bent eagerly forward.

"Hetty," said he, but no answering glow showed upon her face.

"Hetty," again, as her eyelids fluttered faint but lifted not.

"Hetty—dear wife," the last two words low, and shy almost, as from lips all unused to tender speech.

"Dear wife!" He had only spoken it once before in their life together, and that on the day they had come to Halfway to live, when he had turned the big key in the latch of that broad front door, and swinging it inward, both portions, had stepped with her inside the fine old home that had been his father's and his grandfather's before him; the intense feeling of the pride within him stirring his inmost being to that one single tender expression for the woman who was to share with him his new life there.

Just that once, and never again; starving her all the years since, with crusts of common sense, and practicability, and censure, and silence; when they might have feasted so royally upon sweet and dear expression of married love.

She heard it now, again, though was forever past answering it, in speech. But a fitful smile lighted the dull still face, a sigh as of satisfaction escaped her lips that parted as if a breath had blown them. And in the joy her spirit fled; and she was gone—as far as a ghostly moon or star from his call and care.

In that instant, too, that release from earth, her little sick and wrinkled face bloomed like a flower, the lines smoothed out, full grew the fallen cheeks, and calm and fair she lay upon her pillow as if young and happy and dreaming of the sweet words whispered in her ear.

They had opened wide the great front door, in the old custom, that the soul might have easy exit. There was no sound of footfall down the long winding stair, nor could one who watched have seen a form flit through the broad old hall—no gleam of white wings given to mark her way—

but Aunt Hetty was gone from Halfway; only her small frame of clay left upon the high four-poster.

Joan was away when the end came, at the Post Office, and on to Cousin Louisa's for some errands; Louisa thus wisely planning that she might not see nor know the last offices of Death, so often dread and fearful to the young who walk only by sight, and not by faith. When she came back to Halfway, Aunt Hetty looked dearer and sweeter in death than she had ever looked in life, robed so grandly in her best gown, as she had herself desired and frequently expressed, although a fashion all unusual in the countryside.

"For all the world as if she were dressed for away on her visits," said Phoebe to Louisa as they stood with Joan in the still chamber.

"Let us think it so," said dear Louisa in tranquil phrase; "for in her Father's House-of-many-mansions surely her gentle spirit will find place to wander at her will." The thought came to Joan as a vision, Aunt Hetty in and out among the many mansions; and it soothed for her that first sting of Death.

"Send Jo-ann to me," Uncle Garret commanded in the evening. Pelig and the man at the gates had carried him back to his rooms, and there had been many things for him to consider and to do in the hours since, but now the arrangements all were decided upon, and Pelig had gone forth to carry them out.

A small fire burned upon the hearth-stones. The old Uncle sat up close before it, though it was a warm-breathd night outside. But the drawn shutters and blinds made the house seem cold and shadowy, and Joan was glad herself to see the blazing faggots.

He pushed with his stick a low chair toward the hearth, in strange new courtesy. "Sit there," he said, "and after you have found me Wordsworth you may read me his sonnets."

She found the volume and sat down, but with reluctance

within her heart, for how could she steady her voice to read, so soon after Aunt Hetty had left them. Thus she thought, and almost as if it were careless and neglectful so to do.

But Uncle Garret was wiser, and knew the use that in measured language lies; that often out in the dreary Klondike regions, working in the frozen gravel of the valleys or along the streams within the gulches, he himself would have lost his mind but for remembrance of some fine English verse. And recalling it he told her of a night through and a day through and a night again, those short-lived days when the sun showed only a few hours above the horizon, while he waited, and paced, and guarded his treasure boxes of nuggets and his sacks of shining dust till the boat should come, he had repeated over and over some stirring storied poem; or these sonnet heights; the pictures they brought to those desolate wind-swept wastes, easing the tension, their argument lifting and leading his mind above the sordid search and lust of gold, thus preserving to him his life and his reason.

When he had finished the recital, he bade her read; while she read, sitting with hands crossed upon his stick, gazing into the fire, and far beyond.

She could not reach to the sonnet's heights, in thought, but they were like a string of pearls in expression and imagery, and Joan's mind that visualised so plainly caught their import thus, and was up-drawn. When she came upon "While not a leaf seems faded," Uncle Garret took up the words with her, saying them to the end; when he had finished, bowing his head down upon his hands that rested over his stick, not asking her for more, nor making speech with her. So Joan closed the book. "Will that be enough?" she asked after a little time of silence.

"It is enough," he answered; "you may go now."

She placed the volume back in its shelf, picked up a scattered paper here and there upon the tables, folding them in snug stack as was her wont, lingering a moment, loth to leave him so alone upon such a night, yet knowing full well that

had he wished her to remain longer he would have so signified. Though he had not done so in actual ministration of his own, yet the reading he had asked of her and the pondering upon the fine verse, had comforted her, and himself as well, lifting them above the sharp pangs of those first lonely hours when Death was in their midst.

She laid some fresh sticks upon the fire, trimmed the soft flamed candles upon the high mantel and on the stand beside his chair, seeing to her surprise that his jug was empty and remembering with consternation that she had not been to the spring since her return from Louisa's. Often in an evening's length he would drain it dry, yet now he had been left without for hours. She recalled having seen him stretch out his hand several times toward the stand while she had read, and had vaguely wondered why he did not drink, but bent close upon the unusual matter of the reading, had not given it further thought, at the time.

How could he have got on so long without it? Yet he had not asked for it nor rebuked her for neglect. "Uncle Garret!" she cried, "O, I am so sorry I forgot. I'll get the water now," and she started for the outer door.

But he stayed her, with his own hand reached out, that fell upon her arm.

"It is dark for you to go there, now," said he. "Pelig will get it when he returns."

Her first hot impulse was to start away from his restraining hand, in retort at the sting mayhap implied, but that shadow of Death upon the house, and the pathos of the rigid lonely figure before the old hearth cooled her hot thought. She drew her arm up till her small warm hand rested against his own. "Uncle Garret, I am—not afraid to go," she said.

It strangely moved him, her clear sweet voice with the wistful note, her hand upon his own, and her attitude before him. There had not before been a reference made by either to that night when she had been sent to the mill, and this

unexpected allusion, not really intended on his part, was troubling to them both. How comforting it would have been could he have stretched out his arms and drawn within them for atonement this small lonely grandchild of his sister Joan, and some such longing stirred within herself as she stood before him waiting for his decision.

"I believe that you would not be afraid," said he, "but this time we will have the water brought up by Pelig. Good-night, Jo-ann. Go sit with you Cousin Louisa awhile."

"Good-night," said she, and went her way, wistful still, and wondering if he would have her stay on at Halfway, with Aunt Hetty gone.

CHAPTER XXVI

A LAND WITH RADIANT GLORY FRAUGHT

IT was a grand funeral. "Have everything of the best," said the Master of Halfway as he made the arrangements for it with Alexander; and no expense was spared. At the service he sat in his high-backed chair, at the head of the broad old hall, arms folded upon his breast, eyes straight ahead, as who should say, "Here am I, in the house of my fathers; what is to be said and done shall be done in my sight and hearing."

Beside him, upon his right, sat Joan, at his order, and at his left was another chair, which when first he noted he had bade removed, but Joan had leaned forward and said something to him in low tone and the command was not executed. There were no special mourners besides, but nearly all who gathered there from near and far had some claims, in one way or another, upon the Wisdom name or Aunt Hetty's own family, the assemblage filling the lower rooms of Halfway.

Just before the minister spoke the opening words of the service another footstep sounded upon the door stone outside, and Pelig entered, his rough loose coat buttoned close up to cover the coloured shirt and tie, the worn cap that usually set well back on his red head, held in awkward grasp between both hands. He paused an instant between the doorways of the big front rooms, looking them hurriedly through, then seeing the two occupants at the head of the hall he went directly forward toward them, and lifting the vacant chair at the Master's left, drew it back a little and seated himself upon it in quiet and solemn mien.

The shadow of a frown passed over the impassive face of the Squire as Pelig approached, but Pelig did not flinch at the glance, and at the first low murmur of the prayer dropped his eyes to the floor, nor raised them again the service through.

Presently they were come to the last hymn; the low hushed voices, most of them thin and old, singing with sad strain, for it had been given out as Aunt Hetty's favourite, and they sang for her remembrance.

"There is a La-a-and mine eye hath seen,
In visions o-o-of enraptured thought,
So bright that a-all which spreads betwe-e-en,
Is with its radiant glo-ory fraught,
Is with its ra-a-adiant glory fraught."

And while the low thin voices carried on the second stanza little Aunt Hetty was being taken out from her high place.

"Its skies are no-o-ot like earthly skies,
With varying hu-u-es of shade and light,
It hath no ne-e-ed of Suns to rise.
To dissipa-aate the gloom of night,
To dissi-pa-aate the gloom of night."

She was out of Halfway now, starting down the grassy drive of the grand old front entrance, the balm o' Gilead branches with glistening leaves stretching over head like crossed swords of honour above her way.

"Full as fine as a queen might ask," said Phoebe, low, to Cousin Louisa, as they watched from a window the cortege winding its course down the avenue on the long three miles pace to the burying-ground, only they two left behind with the Master, even Joan, according to the usage of the countryside, following in the procession.

"Hetty would have enjoyed her own funeral if she could

only have seen it. He scrimped her nothing, I'll say that, through sickness nor death. Maybe 'twas love, and maybe remorse, and mayhap 'twas pride, but it showed his respect, whichever it was, and she deserved it, for she'd the heavy end of that marriage, though she made no complaint and had her own way of carrying it. We'll miss her around the place." Thus with a last kind word was the little mistress let go from Halfway where she had loved to dwell.

It was a custom for the nearest of the mourners to stay behind after the burial service was at end, to see that the new grave should be mounded well, and left in order. Several of the kinsfolk had remained, visiting their own plots and examining head stones erected since they last were there. But finally all had departed save Cousin Alexander, and Joan who had driven out with him, and would return with him, to Halfway.

It was Joan's first visit to such a place, and it terrified her, it choked her, and filled her with stubborn protest at death, this side of which she had never before known. Indeed never before had she seen it at all, except in a strange passing procession that did not touch her, nor interest save with its pageantry.

Aunt Hetty taken from her soft warm home and put into the cold ugly earth-bed where the cruel clumps fell with echoing thud upon her! The awful mystery of it brought forth sobs and tears; and Alexander, observing, proposed that she wander off by herself a bit till he should be through what was required of him.

The afternoon sunshine was slanting over the weather-greyed wooden pickets that fenced in many of the plots; the grass of the enclosures high within, the wind running through among its thin stalks. The underbrush of the lowlands as they had driven along had been aflame with the first light touches of frost, but up there on the high sheltered side-hill the spikes of golden rod were still glowing, and here and

there clusters of late briar-rose bloomed 'gainst the grey fence rails.

A city cemetery is a dread and lonely place in its splendour of statue and flower, with strange names and varied upon the head-stones. But a country graveyard is a dear and friendly spot, the families of the parish clustered in close groups, the same name recurring again and again, all together at last in their green beds no matter how far they roamed, or fretted, or strove or loved, all gathered in the dear and homely place to wait the last trump's call.

This strange peace of the old burial ground began to steal upon Joan, taking away the sharpness of her dread and pain. She wandered about, reading here and there the names, and bye and bye came upon a little path that led up a small round hill clothed in pine; old, old graves thick among them, flat with the ground, their stones lichened and moss grown. She scratched away the obliterating moss and read over the inscriptions—Wisdom—Wisdom—all Wisdoms. How far back they must have lived here! Those now living in the Settlement had seemed so old to her young eyes, but here were such older ones—away back. Her own name, too, twice, several times. "Joan Wisdom, wife of——" "Joan Wisdom, wife of——" And then she came upon a curious thing; a fallen grey slab of slate, prostrate across the grave it had once stood above, and chiselled upon it in fresh lettering as though recently cut, and rudely, with awkward implements, "the Gipsy Wife of Uriah Wisdom."

Who had been Uriah Wisdom and why did he marry a gipsy? And why would this new line be added and the other one above it cut away? She must ask Aunt Hetty about it. But with that thought came back with sudden poignancy her loss, and she fell to wandering what the life at Halfway now would be. Would she herself have to go away, perhaps? Who would take Aunt Hetty's place? Would Phoebe stay on? Just then Alexander called to her that he was ready, and she hurried down to meet him.

"How did you like our graveyard?" asked he, as they drove along. "We think it's about the roomiest and the prettiest in the whole country."

"It's almost bigger than the Settlement is, don't you think?" said she. "I mean there seem to be so many more people up there than there are living around here now,"—and that phrase of Aunt Hetty's came to her mind, "big and boastful like all the Wisdom houses."

Cousin Alexander explained. "You're right about it being larger than the Settlement seems, but you see the people have been going up there ever since anybody was living around here at all; and beside that, a Wisdom, no matter where he lives and dies, wants to come back here for burial, longing to lie for their last rest upon that old thin-grassed side-hill, with the pines crooning over them and the wild roses a tangle over their feet, and a still day like this one is, the song of the river-fall away down the Bend. There's pride in it, and there's love in it, and maybe some piety, but mostly it's the homing instinct, and the wanting to be together instead of mixed up in a strange plot. "One, two, three and here we be, I guess," said Alexander.

"And as for myself, why rather than a statue over me in a city square, I'd like to be put up there in that old part, close beside my mother and my father, old fellow though I'll be, snuggling up against them at the last even as I did at first. If there's nothing more than this life, then what so natural as to be together at the end of it all; and if more and better is to follow, as I believe there is, then what so cheery as that one family should want to rise together, eh! But maybe I'm rambling on too long," said he, noting the serious face beside him, "and we'll talk of something brighter; though some day you'll maybe want to get back here yourself, when your work is done out in the world, and then you'll understand."

"I think I understand some of it now," said she quietly, "and I love to hear you talk. Being up there to-day made me

feel badly first, but it helped me afterward; and I won't ever be really lonely again now, for it's so nice to have such a lot of your own family, even if they do have to be up there instead of living; and I'd like to hear all about them, too. Would Uncle Garret tell me? I'm almost afraid to bother him, asking, so I'll have to come down to the office some day and let you tell me."

"Don't be afraid to ask him. That is only his outer crust you fear, and perhaps it's not very thick, and you may be able to crack through if you try. He's going to miss Hetty more than he knows, and while he's lonely this way is the time for you to get your hold in. I believe we all are kept here, or taken, for a wise purpose, to work out the works of Him who sent us. It's a faith I preached when I first was licensed, and I like it yet, and try to live by it. Kind of keeps us all up and doing to the very end. How does it strike you?"

"I like it, too, only I never thought of it before. I guess I always was just thinking about other people and what they did, and didn't know I had a work, myself," said Joan, looking up at the kindly kinsman who had searched out so many wanderers and set them upon their feet with purpose true, and given so many a soul an impulse new in the right direction. "Why didn't you keep on being a preacher?" she asked.

"Well now, that's as pretty a compliment as I ever had paid me!" exclaimed Alexander, beaming down over his glasses upon her. "I've never been really sure myself that I did right to give it up, but according to this belief of mine that everybody has a certain work cut out for him, preaching didn't seem to be mine, for first my voice gave out, and then my parents both were paralysed and no one to care for them but me, so I had to come back to the old home and go on with the lumbering and farming. And once back, I got tied up with things, and stayed on; and I

hope have followed the path that was blazed out for me, but I often feel troubled about it, for as the old hymn goes,

'I wander oft, and think it Thine
When wandering in my own.' "

"And when I'm gone," he continued after a pause, "it does me good to know that what's left behind is all going out to spread the gospel. My two sons, one of them is in the Army and one in the Navy. I never thought I'd raise a soldier and a sailor, but there they are, doing their work in those callings and doing it well, for they've been promoted to responsible posts. I'm not much for war, but I reckon it will always be breaking out here and there unless we can catch the Devil and chain him up again, and so those two things, the Army and Navy, have got to go on. The sea is the Lord's, and He made it, and could keep it free without help of man, same as He could run the lands, but He seems to choose to send His messengers running to and fro over it all to get the soundings and to settle the boundaries thereof. So Cyrus and Dick are following their paths there, and they don't want me to leave them a dollar of my money, though there's quite a sum of it.

" 'Not a dollar, sir,' they said to me, the last time they were back on leave, and they helped me themselves to make out the instrument that gave it all to the Cause. 'Just leave us the old house,' said Dick, 'half and half, so we can come back when we like, and that's all we ask!' I'm favored to have such sons, and they'll be blessed themselves for their fine spirit. But you'll think I haven't ever given up preaching! When I get a good listener like you are I clean forget myself."

"I like it, every word," said the little listener sincerely. "I'm so glad I came. I didn't really want to, and it was hard to see the burial, you know, but you've helped me such a lot. And then I've got so many more people to love, now,

those dear ones up there on the hill—and my 'work in the world,'" she added with sweet and serious mien.

"Well, now meeting's out!" said Cousin Alexander. "You're young and mustn't be kept solemn and sad. Here we are at the trough that's an overflow Garret lets down from the watering trough up at Halfway, and we can have a drink if you're thirsty. If this dry weather continues," said he, getting out to let fall the check rein, and flecking with his whip the heavy dust upon the carriage top, "we'll see some suffering, I'm afraid. The wells on the high ground are going dry already, and brooks in the pasture lands. There hasn't been a shower for six weeks. Even the trough is falling in depth, I see."

"Our spring has dropped a little," said Joan, "but Uncle Garret says it can't all go away, because it never has yet."

"He'd better not be too sure, though we all kind of swear by that spring. It's been a wonderful fountain, and is a pretty spot where it bubbles up. When we're sick, we Wisdoms, we'd rather have water from there than the best of wine. Kind of like the well of Bethlehem to us all."

"It's the dearest place," said Joan, "all shut in around it like a little house, and I always stay just as long as I dare, till I know Uncle Garret won't want to wait one minute longer."

"You're plucky to make him wait at all. It's not in the blood to wait for what we want, especially water."

"What *makes* us be so thirsty?" asked Joan quickly, so quickly that he answered before he had stopped to think.

"What makes you say us?" said he. "It's only the mem-folk who have to have it," and then he bethought himself and sought to cover his words.

But he had a keen-headed little girl riding beside him. "What is it they have?" she asked, and there was no parrying the question itself, though he might veil the real ugliness of the thing from those fresh young eyes.

"Just an old tale told down through the generation of

us," said he carelessly, "that the Wisdoms can never get enough water to satisfy their thirst. It might affect anybody bad, off in a desert, maybe, or adrift on the ocean, but as far as around here where there's always been water and to spare, why it works us no harm, except the continual craving that's hard on anybody sick, like your Uncle Garret is. Not many of the women folk feel it, except one here and there, and if I were you I wouldn't take it up, just from hearsay—— There used to be an old rhyme about it."

"I know it: 'Sons' sons, and daughters' sons,' " said Joan quickly.

Alexander let fall his reins upon his knees, and looked astonishment out of his two pair of eyes. "Where on earth could you learn it?" asked he.

"I didn't learn it, and didn't even know that I knew it, till you began to speak about it, and then it just came out quick, from away back that first day I came here, on the stage with George. There was another man, a passenger, and he said it over when I got out at Halfway, because he thought I looked like the family, he said. It's queer, though, that it never came to my mind before, for I've often wondered and wondered about us being so thirsty. I am, myself, and I can drink three glasses full now without stopping."

"But you see *you* don't have to be, it's only the men-folk, so you can knock it right off, before it gets a hold on you."

"I see that," said she. "But who started it, and who made the verse about it? I suppose it's one of our 'stories,' is it? Phoebe said the family was 'bristling' with them; that was what she called it."

"Ha! Ha!" laughed Alexander. "Trust Phoebe to put it sharply. Yes, she'll be able to give you the family chronicles fast enough, and they'll not be glossed over any, either. Too bad you couldn't get them from Orin, for she'd make an epic out of what Phoebe would turn into a farce. Louisa and I had hoped your Aunt Hetty's sickness might bring the two households together again, but it hasn't come to pass, I

see, yet. Maybe it's part of your 'work' to do it. We've all tried our hands at it, in vain far as Halfway is concerned, 'but out of the mouths of babes,' the Scriptures say, often comes wisdom to confute age. Speaking of the Island makes me think that I forgot to measure the place for the stones we're going to set up at Jane's grave, and the old gipsy's. Now I'll have to go way up again another day, for I want to have it up over the woman's by the time Lisbeth gets able to go there."

"Do you know the story about the gipsy wife?" queried Joan, recalling the old head stone she had noticed.

"Well, you are a surprise!" exclaimed her companion. "I reckon Louisa is right in saying the women-folk don't tell all they know at first go off. Now where did you get hold of that?"

When she told him about the lettering upon the slab, he mused a bit, before answering her further questions concerning it.

"You need your Aunt Orin to tell you that," said he, "for I'm not much myself on stories. But there's nothing wrong about it. Your Uncle Garret's father in his old age (he was quite on in years before he ever married at all), took for a second wife a gipsy girl that had almost been brought up at Halfway, a good girl she was too, and loved the mistress she had been named for, and nursed her through long sickness to death. She stayed on, to keep house, and care for the children, and someway they fixed it up between them, she and Uncle Uriah, and thought they might as well be married. It was pretty hard on Garret and Joan, that was his sister, you know, for there never were prouder Wisdoms born than these two children were, from their youth up, and having their own mother die so early the pride had got a crooked bent and made them cold and intolerant. Proper pride is a means of grace and growth, but foolish pride is a snare to your feet.

"So it's her name you saw on the stone up there in the old

part," said he, skipping over the story to its end; "but I never knew before that the word *gipsy* was attached to it. Some other day we'll talk some more about it, maybe. Here we are at the Halfway turn. I never saw the time go so quick. It hasn't seemed more than a wink of my eye since we started back, and going at almost a snail's pace too, on account of the mare's lame foot. You're great company, and Garret is lucky, as Captain Nat rightly said, to have you with him. I don't know how you'll get on, though, now, in that great house, and Garret ailing as he is, unless Phoebe will stay with you. Louisa was going to urge her to it while we were gone. I see Nat's team is back, and he'll be there for supper too. It will take Garret's mind off his loss to have to talk to us a bit, and things will all shake out right, so take a heart, and do your 'work,'" said Cousin Alexander, as he helped her down from the carriage. "We'll all lend a hand, and you must feel free to come to us with whatever you can't lift yourself. What else are we for, your own flesh and blood! And I never wanted a drink from that spring more than I do this very minute, hot and dusty as I am."

"She's a likely girl, a likely girl," said he later, as he and Louisa drove homeward, "and except for her gentle heart that comes from the Island side, in looks and ways is as patterned after her grandmother Joan as if they grew on one stalk. I used to have quite a hankering for Joan when I was a young fellow, Louisa, but I calculated there had been too much marrying back and forth in the family and it was wiser to look elsewhere."

"And wise you were," said Louisa placidly. "I've made you a sight happier than she ever could."

"I expect you're right, as usual," said he, "and I'm sure I'm satisfied, myself. But it's a queer mix-up, too, how things work out. She ran away from Halfway with one of the Island family, and was never allowed back home, and

disinherited by Garret and her father both, yet here's her grandchild up there now with Garret instead of down at the Island where they'd pet and love her. Wonder how it's all going to turn out. We must have her down to spend the day, and Lisbeth with her."

"Amsey and Orin are getting greatly set on Lisbeth," said Louisa. "I have been over several times while so near, and she is a dear girl. With her lameness cured, and Orin to train and teach her, in that lovely peaceful home, she'll make a fine woman."

"They can't leave the home to her, for the Island property is entailed, and little Joan would be the proper heir I suppose, unless Amsey should choose to break it. And dear knows who'll get Halfway; it's Garret's own, according to his father's will. But there have been several things happen lately, rather strange, and putting two and two together I've an idea how the wind's blowing, though maybe I'd better wait to tell you, till I'm really sure."

"Do," said she. "I'd wear out in no time putting two and two together that way you're always doing, and arriving at your deductions so laboriously."

"Deductions!" said he. "A big word again, Louisa, and a 'proper' enough one, too; it sounds like a term out of my old logic book."

"I don't know what it sounds like but I do know that I can reach a conclusion without the thinking and pondering that you put upon it," said she.

Alexander laughed that quiet laugh of good comradeship.

"Logic or no logic, Louisa, I hate it that there's no man of the family left to inherit the two old places, and keep up the name in the region where once they dwelt upon the hills all round about." And they fell to talking of the olden times, as they drove on through the quiet country way.

CHAPTER XXVII

YOUTH'S VISION SPLENDID

THAT night, when kindred and friends had left Halfway, and Phoebe and Joan were asleep upon their beds, Garret Wisdom still sat up within the wing rooms. He had given orders that he did not wish to retire, but to spend the night as he chose, upon chair or couch. The strain of the day just past had left its mark upon him, his face was grey and drawn, and the hands stretched out to the small fire that burned upon the hearth, shook as he sought to warm them by its blaze. The chill was within him, in his heart that he so seldom opened to love's sunshine, in his stern inexorable will that so long had known no yielding breath nor suffered soft petitions, pity and remorse to melt.

Twice he thought he heard what seemed steps upon the verandah, but the sounds died away. A third time it fell upon his ears, plainly, approaching footsteps, and a rap upon the door.

"Enter," said he abruptly, as was his wont.

The door opened and Pelig stood upon the threshold. "I hope you'll excuse me for disturbing you, sir," said he, closing the door and standing against it. "And I hope you'll overlook it, doing what I did to-day, sitting up with you, at the funeral, but I had to, someway—— I can't say it right, nor the way I want to, but it was the fine cussed old blood in me made me do it and I couldn't help myself. I told Joan I would, and asked her to tell you I was going to, and then I thought I couldn't, for there were so many folks, and I had no proper clothes. So I kept outside, taking care of their teams, and doing what was asked of me, but some-

thing mad and proud came up in me, and clothes or not, or hired or owner, why should I stay out there, with her funeral going on inside who was always good and kind to me; and I would have dared it even if you and everybody else had tried to order me out." He said it valiantly, yet brokenly, and not with the hot spirit in his tone that the words bespoke.

"Sit down, Pelig," said the Master of Halfway, and the youth did as he was bid. "Say what you have to say, for 'tis late. No need to make excuses. She deserved so sincere a mourner, and the courage to do it proved your sincerity. But I see you have other things upon your mind as well; speak out."

"I will," said he doggedly. "You never asked me about my own family, but you knew all the time that my true name was Wisdom, even if I did come to you with another. My father did not live up to his good name, he drank, and used my mother cruel, when he was drinking, and when he died she said we would take her own name, and start the world new. We did, but she died herself, soon, and I had to go out working round wherever I'd get a job. I got some chance at school here and there, not much, but it's easy for me to learn what's set before me, and I don't forget."

"Which are Wisdom gifts," said the old man.

"So I've been told," continued the youth, "and there are bad ones I've been told of, too. But I kept hearing about the family, and about Halfway being the old place where they first started out around this part. So when I knew of the chance to come here to work I made up my mind I'd come, and take back my father's name, and that was why I went in bold to dinner that day so I'd start out right and be a Wisdom from the first. But once I'd done that, the zest was gone, and I saw I didn't properly belong to Halfway, and was for giving it all up again; when Joan came. And it was different after that, for she used to speak with me now and then, and tell me what she'd picked up about the

name, and how she felt what she called the honour of it, and what it stands for."

Garret Wisdom interrupted him sharply. He had been watching the boy as he spoke, wondering at the ready speech, much of it the common vernacular, but here and there weightier words, or a bookish phrase, spoken with a halting pause between, as though bringing them forth hardly, from out the golden treasury of his memory. But that allusion to the honour of the name, in someway antagonised the man, as if Pelig had presumed upon the relationship to imply something personal.

"What do you and she know about the honour of any name?" asked he curtly.

"I don't say that I know much myself, as yet, because I'm just beginning to feel out after it, but I'll tell you how she understands it. That night you sent her down alone to the mill, to see who was running your trick, she never told me it was you sent her, but tried to let me think she came of her own curiosity, though I sensed all right who had done the starting. What did she keep it back for? Why, for what she thought was *your honour,* because she didn't want to have you thought mean of, nor to have me be turned against you. And she's never spoken a word about it since, though she's asked about my cut, and how I made out with it and all that; and I only got at the real truth of it from Phoebe."

"That will do," said Garret Wisdom, rapping with his cane upon the floor. "Be thankful I never questioned you, myself, about your cut. I presume you came to me tonight for other matter than that, so get on with it, for I am weary."

"Yes, I don't know as I did come for only that," said Pelig; "but if it's news to you, as I see it is, I'm glad I let you hear it so you'll know how to judge her properly about it. And you've got to hear me to the end, even if I do bungle things in their order. It was Joan, and Mrs. Wisdom being kind to me as they were, that helped decide me again to take

up the name for good, and be somebody in the world. But that night of the party settled the thing, for I got mad clear through; not at them, for I know they'd only just forgot; but I was mad at what had been my share of luck in life; and at you having everything and me nothing; and because you knew who I was and yet had never asked me over the doorsill of your room here, nor asked what I expected to do in the world, nor tried to give me a spur up; and that was why I made myself go in, the way I did, to shame you, and the whole crew of them who didn't care, I thought, whether I went to hell or not so long as you all were prospering yourselves.

He paused of his own accord this time, for the words poured forth now in a torrent, as if from a pent-up fount of bitterness. But his listener did not speak in the pause.

"Maybe 'twas the being mad helped me, and maybe 'twas the way you all treated me after I got in," said he, "but I got my start all right, that night, and every one of them since has treated me fair. The Postmaster gave me the cut of lumber; and Captain Nat offered to get me a job in town, where I could work and go to school; and none of them, men or women, gave me the go-by on account of my poor clothes or hard luck. So I've been turning it all over in my mind, and I've come to my conclusion. I'm going into town to take up with Captain Nat's offer, and I've come to ask if you'll release me my next month that I had signed on for, and pay me my wages; for if I want the job, I've got to go to-morrow, or not take it at all."

"Your signed contract expires September the thirtieth," said the Master of Halfway, "and your wages will naturally be paid you when you have worked out your time."

"I know that, commonly speaking," said the youth.

"Commonly speaking," repeated the Master with stinging emphasis of mockery.

"Those are the words I meant," replied Pelig stolidly. "Far as the papers go, I can't expect you to release me, but

I'm asking you because you know who I am. You treated me fine that evening, yourself, I'll say that; and treated me fair far as real contract goes, never putting more upon me than I bargained for, though you never did give me a word of thanks. But that's all done with now, and I'm asking you, on account of our name, if you'll let me off, pay me my money and let me have my chance."

"And what will Halfway do without a man to carry on the work you have been at? Hiram can not do your share and his as well. Work out your month, and then talk to me about leaving."

The youth met fair the glance upon the stormy old face. "I tell you I've got to take it now or lose it," said he. "Do you think I'd come here bothering you on the night when you've had sorrow, unless I had to! It was only to-day at the funeral that I learned it, the fellow whose place I'm to take is leaving sudden, to-morrow. It's in the big lumber concern, and lumbering is what I'm going to go in for. I've no head for farming, but I've one for figures, and I can run a mill, and I know lumber, standing, through and through; the sighting you had me do this summer has given me a good start on it. I can almost measure with my eyes and measure fair, and I can pick out any kind of tree from the grain of the wood, and I know their barks at sight. But it's all I do know, so I've got to use it to get on with, since I haven't book knowledge. I'm going to take that place, and I'm going to make myself so indispensable to that company that they can't get on without me, see!"

It was strange to watch them, as Pelig spoke, the young man so like the older in his stern vehemence, and that "see" at the close, so like the other's oft repeated "do you understand."

"Indispensable," mocked the older man.

Hot with the sting of the tone, and the denial of his request where he had hoped for encouragement or acquiescence, Pelig sprang to his feet. "The words of the language are as much

mine as yours, aren't they? You can't get a mortgage on them, as you have on most of the land round about! You may keep the money you owe me, but you can't keep me here, and you can't stop me from getting on in the world, for if you live long enough you'll see me at the head of that lumber concern or another as big. I've got to do it, for my mother, and for my dad whose name I've taken again. See! And that old place of theirs down at Hardscrabble is going to be mine before another year is out. That's what I'm saving up for, and why I bargained with you to keep my wages, instead of using them up month by month. Do you suppose I'd have gone without decent clothes, for any other reason? Not a suit to my back to fit my name, or Halfway,—or to be seen at her funeral to-day! And I tell you I'll have that place, whether you pay me or not. It's nothing much but rocks and weeds but I'm going to keep it fenced, straighten up the bit of a house where my mother and father lived, and let it be known again as John Wisdom's place. I've no right to judge him, perhaps, but he let things go slack, somehow, and didn't try ever to take his proper stand in the municipality. So I've got to do it for him, to redeem the name; you needn't reach out your claws for that little spot for it's going to be mine!"

Garret Wisdom piffled in scorn again. "And maybe have your eye on Halfway as well!" said he, reaching out his hand toward his desk and opening a lower drawer within it.

"No, I don't know as I was planning on Halfway, though there's none of us could live in it and not love it, and want it for our own."

The Master stayed his hand at the sudden absence of heat in the boy's voice, and the frank expression of admiration for the old house that he himself cherished so proudly and fondly. But Pelig burst forth again, with vehemence. "It's Hardscrabble I'm after, and I'll have it in spite of your keeping my money back."

At that the Master opened the drawer, drew from out it a

package of papers, ran them through with quick fingers, and pulled out one, unfolding it as he passed it over to the youth.

It was an old document, the seal upon it split, and half fallen away; within it another sheet, indentured with rude notched clipping upon its margin to match the other. Pelig reached for it, and without speaking, read it through; but his hands trembled as he read, for it was the deed of the Hardscrabble homestead, and it was now in Garret Wisdom's name.

His freckled face went white, then flamed in passion. "You Devil!" said he, "You—you——"

"Go on," said Garret Wisdom imperturbably, no longer angry himself since he was so plainly the victor. "Go on—I haven't a lien on the language, you know."

"Nor on that piece of land for long! I'll tell you that! I heard the Postmaster was carrying Mr. Brown along on it, and I thought maybe he would turn over the mortgage to me, if I could make him a first payment outright. And I was silly enough to think you would have even gone security for me! He had it just before I came here to Halfway."

"It has been mine since a month before you came. Alexander only held it to help the man out, and would have yielded it to him, mortgage and all, had he wanted it. But the man has gone West, and I took it off his hands."

Pelig dropped his anger, and pleaded. "Will you let me have it if I can get you the full price, in cash?"

"Not selling Halfway lands at present," said Garret Wisdom coolly.

"You don't mean you'll not let me have it! My money is good as anybody's!"

"I said what I meant," replied the old man.

"But it was my father's land, and my grandfather's!"

"And my grandfather's before it was theirs."

"But you have everything else beside," urged the youth. "Let me have this! I've gone to sleep every night the last three months, thinking on it. It's no treasure to you."

Garret Wisdom must have lost himself, almost, with the sorrow and the effort of the days just past, for he played with him, cruel, as a lion with its prey; or mayhap may have tried him. "I hear there is likely gold upon it," said he; "the quartz lead from the big mine down the river dips that way."

His victim turned upon him. "I tell you you'll not have it! There's that on it richer than gold, to me. There's a rose-bush there that my dad called a Wisdom rose, and my mother tended it after he was gone, because she said he loved it and was never drinking so bad when it bloomed; and we always knew overnight when a bud was going to burst and went out together in the morning to watch it come out; whether we had much breakfast or not we didn't care, those mornings. And I was down last year, and it had spread to a whole clump of them—and you shan't have those rose-bushes. See! They're ours! There's my mother there, too. She has her grave under a balm o' Gilead tree as good as Halfway's got, and you shan't have her grave! See! And I plan to find out where my dad was put, he died away somewhere, but I'll fetch him back, beside her; and we're going to start the world over again, the three of us; and we'll beat you out of that place somehow!"

His anger was terrible. It wrecked his whole frame. He ran his trembling hands up through his red shock of hair that was wet upon his high forehead. He swayed back and forth, his Wisdom eyes burned black.

"It's ours, and you'll not have it! You—Devil!" And he sank in a heap upon the settle, and buried his face upon his arms, great dry sobs convulsing him.

The log upon the dog-irons fell apart, rolling against the fender with burst of spark and flutter of white ashes.

The old clock that had ticked out the Halfway hours for generations of Wisdoms, struck twelve, and ticked on in a new day.

Presently the boy rose. His face was worn with his travail

sore. He looked old and haggard, yet looked a child needing a mother's tenderest love. But in that travail his soul had been born, and from henceforth would captain his life.

"Good-day, Mr. Wisdom," said he. "By the clock my month is out. If you decide to give me my lawful pay, you may have it sent to the Postmaster for me to-morrow. I'll be at Halfway no more after this day."

"I understand," said Garret Wisdom, unmoved in mien or feature. "Good-day, Pelig."

The boy straightened his shoulders, and stood his full height by the door. "I told you my name," said he.

"It was Pelig Miller when you signed your contract," remarked the old man coolly.

"It's John Wisdom now," and as he said it over he turned the big knob and swung wide the door, standing in its portal, looking straight into the eyes of the Master, unflinchingly.

"Good-night, John Wisdom," said the Master, and John Wisdom went out, and closed the door behind him.

He had been worsted, and yet had he won, for he went out from Halfway a man, with his lawful name, a soul and a vision.

When he had gone the old man lifted the broken logs in place upon the irons, with what faggots that he could reach from his chair feeding the fire till it flamed bright again, illumining the long room. But he shivered still, and drew his over-gown close, holding out his hands to the glowing blaze.

It had been a long day, and a hard one, as he had said, and a wonder it was to them all that he had stood it through with no spasm of pain as so often cramped his limbs and sapped his nerve. Nor had he once through all its hours, nor through the other days while his wife lay dead at Halfway, made outcry of temper, nor displayed his wonted impatience of spirit, though silent and moody.

Phoebe would fain have settled him easy upon his bed in the early evening, and Alexander and Louisa had also

urged it, but he had not yielded, insisting instead upon being left to rest as he might choose throughout the night.

Well, thought he, the night was already half gone. Why should Pelig have come to plague him, and so set him at nought, and stir up wrath at the end of such a day—and what right had he to forget to bring up the fresh water! Phoebe had said he would fetch it, and he supposed when first he heard the knock that he had come to bring it. Several nights of late it had been forgotten. Perhaps it had been Hetty who always had seen that it was done, for never until her sickness had he remembered being left without it. He wondered if he could go through now, until morning, and reaching over tipped the jug, to see if possibly any had been left within. But it was empty, and dry. His throat was parched, how was he to do without it!

How lonely it was, and chill too, for a day that had been so hot and dusty. And he was left a lonely old man, no wife to wait upon his wants, from henceforth dependent upon his hirelings, except Joan. He had her, bound by law, to stay. And how she drew him to her, in spite of his resistance; her little dark oval face and the flower smile that lighted it, took him back, as he dwelt upon it, to long gone days when he and his young sister were all in all to each other. So long ago it seemed, to-night, and yet her face so plain before him. That other one, too, the little half-sister, of the free-footed brown-faced race, but with Wisdom eyes of bluest hue— But why recall them now? He dismissed them from his mind. Why fret himself over the past? He and Joan were left at Halfway, and must make the best of it; if Phoebe would stay on; and that must be settled on the morrow, of course.

He would now have to look around him for a new hired man. Pelig had been a good one, he would not deny that, to be depended upon, absolutely, in all that he undertook, even though so young and untrained. He had meant to do something for him, too, when his time was up, and to find

out his bent, and aims—but this high-handed onslaught of to-night would be unforgivable. The affair of the mill, that night sawing, he had overlooked, because he had rather liked the fact of the boy's enterprise, but this impudence could not be passed over.

"Indispensable!" he muttered aloud, mockingly, musingly. "Municipality! 'Head of the concern!' 'John Wisdom!' Gad, but the fellow had looked born again when he went out, compared to the time he came, near a year ago, fumbling and awkward—'John Wisdom!' "

He swung his chair around, pushing forward with cane and foot till he was at his desk, took from a small safe within it a little canvas bag of gold, and counted out what he owed him, thirty sovereigns there were. Garret Wisdom loved gold, and kept it by him always, instead of paper. One hundred and fifty dollars; it was good pay for a young fellow, but he liked to pay high, and be able to exact as high returns. He would have it put up for him in the morning, for of course he had only played the boy, about his wages, and meant to pay him all right. It never should be said that the Squire of Halfway sent out a lad of his own name, with unpaid wages. He counted them over again. Yes, it was right, thirty pieces, and he placed them in an envelope, sealing it, and writing plainly upon it the new name, "John Wisdom." Hiram would leave it at the office, in Alexander's keeping.

"Thirty pieces." Why should that phrase creep with troubling thought to his weary brain. He had done no traitorous deed. He had bought the Hardscrabble place, fair and square, with never even a knowledge then, of the boy's existence. It was Wisdom land for sale, and he was buying in Wisdom lands—that was all there was to it.

He opened up the packet of papers again, and read over the two old titles to the property before it had passed to Uncle Jock. Since then, through parting with portions here and there it had shrunken in boundaries, and was now a pitifully

small holding, mostly rocks and weeds at that, as the boy had said; but it had once belonged to the Halfway grant, and he wanted to leave behind him and to own before he should have to leave it behind, all the old domain; this small plot at Hardscrabble was part of the scheme, and he was absolutely justified in getting and in keeping it. He folded up the papers and snapped them inside the packet.

And then swift came back a picture of the old great-uncle. Jock he was called, though his name had been John, an educated man, and genial, and full of wit, but broken in strength early in life, because he had wasted his substance in riotous living. Luck had always seemed to be against him, even in his place that had turned out to be stubble and stone, a God-forsaken barren spot with the stingy soil but a few inches deep over granite ledges, and the water acrid in well or spring—handicapped, he had been, at the very start, with a site like that to live upon.

His son, young Jock as he was known, had evidently been caught also in the meshes of ill-fortune, encumbered by the sins and defects of those long dead, and the "thirst" beside. Unto the third and fourth generation—how relentlessly such bad hap often follows down a family. And Pelig was the last of them, with perhaps no brighter hope. From the fathers unto the children!

He was a good worker, though, and saving, or how could he have left his wages uncollected? A hot temper he had, and pluck of his own, too, without doubt, as those three occasions had proved, when he had, as it were, 'announced' himself. Before he was aware Garret Wisdom chuckled at the thought of how the lad looked, stalking in that first day to dinner. And here he was now with a new name, thirty sovereigns of gold, and what he thought was going to be a "chance to get on." Would he—or not!

—John Wisdom! Gad, but the name sounded good again, too; and come to think of it there wasn't another young fel-

low in the whole countryside with the name and the blood as well; the Wisdoms were petering out. "And he stood up straight and bold and cursed me as good as I could have done it myself!" Perhaps he might be a scion of the race to be proud of, yet, or would he be handicapped, as those other Jocks had been, and *by* them! And he had wanted Hardscrabble for the very same reason that he himself was buying up all the land round about, simply because it had once been his father's property. Why not let him have it! Pshaw! Let him take his wages, and go out in the world, and fight for his "chance."

The fire burned low again, and smouldered down; the brands died in their white ashes.

Garret Wisdom reached over to the empty jug once more. His throat was craving a drink—what right had any of them to forget his nightly portion? He was a fool not to have sent Pelig to the spring, for how could he worry on till daylight without it, with a burning thirst even now? What a curse it was, down through the long years, to follow and hound them as it had! And Uncle Jock's had gone to liquor, and his son's, also, and hard luck with it as well! Pelig, too, would go the same way, likely—unless he got his "chance."

He pulled out the documents again and read through the deed. He put it back. And then quickly drawing it out once more, reached for his quill, and spreading the sheets before him, wrote upon a fresh one, swiftly as he might with his cold cramped fingers, executing a conveyance of the property; wrote, and signed, and affixed his seal thereto; a transfer that, duly witnessed and recorded, would give to John Wisdom the Hardscrabble house and lands, its rose-clumps, its graves, its granite ledges.

And though the stern old lips were straight and tight as if uncut stone, the face unmoved, there was something shining in the deep blue eyes akin with Youth's Vision splendid;

and tumbling himself off his chair over onto his couch he drew the rugs about him, and through the long lonely hours that were left of the night, slept, as a child upon its mother's arm; nor waked to thirst, for he had quaffed a cooling draught from fount long sealed.

CHAPTER XXVIII

JOAN IS MISTRESS AT HALFWAY

JOHN WISDOM walked across the yard to the back door of Halfway. The August moon shone light as day. He halted for a moment on the broad door-stone that commanded a view of the long lane at the left and the last end of the Balm o' Gilead avenue. O, how he loved the old house and its broad surrounding acreage, the great timber tracts, its green meadows, the uplands with their cropping flocks of sheep, the gay blooming garden, and the spring. He had come to it, a simple wondering boy, a stranger to the place and name; was going from out it a man, with a purpose, linked up and bound about with all the glories and gifts and all the sins and defects of his ancestors, yet with his own free will to make choice of his own sentiment from out them, and the path his own feet should tread.

The bow-sweet apple tree beside the door was fragrant with its yellowing fruit. In the warm still night he could smell the mellow scent of them, and as he stood, one fell, with soft rush through leaves, to the grass below. He had been picking up these ripe falls and placing them beside the milk-pails in the early mornings, for those in the house who might wish them; but Joan had them mostly, and she had never failed to thank him for them through the day. He thought of her now, and that he would not be seeing her again after he left Halfway.

She and Lisbeth were the only girls he ever had known. They were alike and yet unlike, the rose of the wayside and the rose of the garden, and who should choose between, since both lift their sweet faces to Heaven to bloom for

beauty's joy? John Wisdom liked them each. The girl at the cabin would toss a quick answer sometimes to a passing jest, and he could have talked to her more readily because she had the easy way of the countryside, yet with a sweet grace and constraint of her own much like Joan's. But it was Joan who had stirred to life that spark of inborn pride of name and race, and a purpose in life; friendly and companionable, as she brought him his books and talked of their contents, but with a delicate unconscious reserve that had made him feel she was above the common way, as a star shining aloft. Co-worker she had been with the great solemn forests he had roamed the season past, their deep recesses; the giant trees and the high winds that swayed their green tops, the illimitable stretches—all in them that had lifted him upward, and out of himself.

He had not put it thus, in words, as he thought, for never had he in actual speech been able to express any adequate measure of the new life stirring within him, until this night when he talked to the Master of Halfway. A sudden recollection of the interview brought a scowl to his face and quick beat of heart with brain. "I'll have Hardscrabble from him if I have to steal it. I'll have it somehow," said he passionately, and passing across to where the pail of water sat for the night, lifted the mug from its nail and drank his fill; as he went inside, and up the stairs to his ell-room chamber, recalling with grim satisfaction that eager hand of the Master stretched out more than once as they had talked, for the water that was not there; a mute reaching which he had not noted with understanding at the time, but now realised with gratification.

"Let him suffer with it," muttered he. "He has Halfway, and Hardscrabble—and the thirst!" And brooding thus upon the wrongs, fell asleep. But not for long. He wakened sharply. Upon his bed the moonlight lay, a bright beam of it adown the bare wall. The roof was finished to its peak, and the sweet-clover bunches hanging aloft were

swaying in the breeze that blew through the skylight windows. They were white and sweet even yet, for the Mistress of Halfway had gathered them fresh at Hannah's just before departing upon her visit. He had tied and hung them for her, in her own room, and in this ell-chamber of his, marvelling that she would think to put them here, for him. And he thought of how much they were going to miss her, at Halfway, the Squire mostly, for though she had her own queer quiet ways, and often braved and as often brought down his ire upon her head, she had always seen to it that they all ministered to his wants and his weaknesses; while now he would be left to Phoebe's none too tender mercies; Phoebe who would boss and antagonise and deny him. It was more than probable that it was Phoebe who had forgotten the water on purpose, even on this first night of his loneliness and bereavement. And John Wisdom, remembering the interview just past, was glad she was thus denying him.

But the sweet-clover bunches swayed back and forth, their scent strong upon the air, and suddenly the boy remembered something the little gentle mistress had told him. He had asked her about the thirst, and what it meant, and she told him of an effort she had once made to break the spell it held upon her husband, keeping the water from him for a day and night, watching with him to see if they might conquer its hold; that he had nearly died in the struggle; and at grey dawn of a terrific storm she had crept down herself to the spring and brought him his portion, fearing he would have passed away, even ere she could return.

How would go the fight this night, he wondered. Would he die? Nobody knew how strong and heavy the curse might lay its blight upon a Wisdom. As for himself he was only commencing to get in its toils; a pang of it in the timber lands when long out of his course, or late in fruitless search for straying cattle; but the craving had not been easy to bear. Whatever else Garret Wisdom had done, or had not done, at least he was clear of bringing that "fate"

upon the Wisdom name. Its doom fell upon him with them all, the just and the unjust.

The boy had their brain, that worked quick, making eager strong decisions; and in spite of the present enmity he felt toward him there was a pride down within his heart for the handsome stern old Master of Halfway, his kinsman, that attracted his young spirit. He rose from his bed and dressed again, stole softly down the stair and out the door, taking a pail upon his arm as he passed; and presently was back from the spring and at the wing room door with the full pail of water, all along the way seeing in imagination that small fleet figure of the gentle Mistress hurrying with fearful steps lest the sufferer die before she could return.

Garret Wisdom would have no lock nor bar upon his door, and the youth knew it. Turning the knob softly lest he might perchance have slept, and stepping with soft tread as he saw him lying upon the couch, peaceful in slumber, he placed the brimming bucket upon the hearth stones, with the cocoanut dipper beside it, in easy reach; and coming out again, closed the door behind him without a sound to wake the sleeper. They both had stormed and striven. Both had also yielded—in the Wisdom way, not to each other, but to something right and just enshrined within.

By the time Phoebe was bustling about the big kitchen to start the day's affairs, he whom she had known as Pelig had cleared out carriage house and barns, righted up the tool chests and garden-shed, packed his worn old bag with his few belongings, breakfasted at the farm-house, and was back at Halfway to say his good-bye.

Sitting down with Phoebe upon the door stone, he told her of his new name, his opportunity, and the reasons for his sudden departure, but told her not of his stormy encounter with the master. And Phoebe gave her approval, and praise without stint.

"Go," said she; "you'll be at the top rung some day

all right, if you watch out sharp in your mounting. There are inclinations born within you, like as not, that can pull you down if you give in to them, but there are enough others to keep you steady if you'll let them have the lead. Whatever you've done here, you've done well, but don't be cocky and think you can't be improved upon. Keep as good company as you are yourself and as much better as you can get. And don't scorn good clothes. There's no call to be a dude or a sport, but dress as well as you can within your means, for many a sloven has lost a good snap to a snug clothed fellow. If Garret Wisdom had half an eye out for business, let alone what's owing to you for relationship, you wouldn't need to go abroad to snatch up snaps and chances, for he'd keep you here to run Halfway lands for him with a good slice of them for yourself beside. But he's blind and balky, and I'll have my hands full with him. It's like trying to whistle down the wind to turn him from his ways; maybe I'll not be able to manage him discreetly as Hetty did, but I'll manage him!"

"He's asked you to stay, then? I'm glad of that," said Pelig.

"Asked me to stay!" said she giving vent to a scornful snort. "I'm not waiting for his asking. I rented my house and packed my trunk all ready, a week before Hetty breathed her last, and it's Halfway I'm in charge of from now on. Who else is there able to do it, I'd like to know, and run it as it should be? I may not have as much knack with girls as I have with men and housekeeping, but Joan's a likable one, if she doesn't grow too Wisdomey, and we'll get on the best we can. She carried herself great through the sickness, helping us all out, and I'll call her now to say good-bye, though she's fagged out and ought to be let to sleep this day. But she'll be sorry to hear the news of your going, for now that you've taken the name and all, you and she could have gone about some together, to let her see young life now and then."

"Don't call her," said he. "I've to come by later in the day, after I speak for my passage with George, and I'll see her then."

"Good-bye then, John Wisdom," said Phoebe, with a handshake as hearty as the good will that beat beneath her brusque speech. "And don't forget, now while you're just starting out, that it's good for us Wisdoms to have the Lord over us. If Garret had bowed to Him early in life it would have kept him down a peg to know there was somebody he couldn't bully and bluster. I'm glad you'll be in to see him ahead of me, this day, for I left him without his pitcher of water last night and am as near frightened as ever I was to go nigh him. But while I'm out in the dairy you can be making your farewells with him, and the edge will get taken off his temper a bit."

With which Phoebe was gone. But though Pelig was not unwilling to shield her, he had no further farewells to make within the wing rooms, and went on his way instead.

Joan feared he had gone without her good-bye, but she found him at the spring when she went for the early afternoon's supply.

He took the bucket from her and sank it in the pool of the spring. "We'll leave it there to cool off," said he.

"I'm so glad you hadn't really gone," said she. "Phoebe thought you had. And O Pelig, you've a whole new suit on, I see!—and it looks splendid."

"I owe that to Phoebe. I was stubborn enough to think I'd beat along in my old rig, but she ordered me to get a new outfit, and I reckon she's wise about it too, for I feel fifty per cent more successful right off, though they're almost shop-warm yet."

"She's a great Phoebe," said Joan, "but I can't seem to get on the right side of her always. I'd like to love her if she'd really let me. She likes you, Pelig, and she's awful sorry you are going, and so am I. It's queer to have Aunt Hetty and you both gone almost at once, and a kind of new

life all over again, just as I had begun to get used to the other. But it's great, your chance. She told me about it. And, Pelig, I just do believe it was because you came in that night to the party, that started it all. I don't see how you ever got up courage to, either. I would have been frightened. But if you hadn't, why none of them would have known about you, for ever so long, perhaps. Now you're just one of us, and Phoebe says you've got spunk enough to go through a stone wall. It's fine to be a boy, and be able to do things out in the world. Girls can't do much."

"You're wrong about that," said he, struggling in his mind for adequate expression of what was in his heart, stumbling in speech at first, but growing at ease as he proceeded. "Before I came here I never cared much whether I owned anything or not. I just worked on for other folks, wherever I'd a job, and didn't lift my eyes any further than the end of the turnip rows I was thinning out, or the corn I was hoeing for them. I hadn't had any one since my mother was dead and gone, to care whether I came or went so long as I did their work they paid me for; nor had clothes to look decent in; nor any place of my own beside the shack they gave me to sleep in. And it was a girl who taught me in school once, who gave me the first start that made me find out who my family was, and want to be one of them. And it was Mrs. Wisdom who gave me my fine clean bedroom and a place at her table, that made me decide to be clean and decent myself, and fit to use them. Then after you came I began to get farther along, because you didn't look down on me, but talked to me, and made me see someway that there was more to work than just chopping and hauling—you got me books, and you asked me about them so I felt I had to read them close. I don't know anything much yet, but if it hadn't been for you three women I'd never have got out of the rut at all. So girls can do a lot in the world, all right."

Joan smiled her wistful smile. "I love it that you've really got out of the rut," said she, but scarce comprehending even from his utterance what marvel she had done him in leading him even that little way into the new life which he might never have entered without her guiding, living and carrying about with him only the implements with which he gained his daily bread, and so concerned with their workings that he might have groped and grovelled along that low level instead of lifting his eyes as now to the green-clothed summits.

"I'd just like to know I was going to do big things all myself, too, sometime, not just helping. And you've even got a new name. Aren't you glad it's Wisdom—John Wisdom. It sounds big and good, doesn't it? It's like one of those tall straight oak trees you showed me that day. You'll have to do all different things, now, won't you, to match it, you know?"

"I see what you mean," said he. "Pelig was just a scrub-tree, the kind that grows on swamp edges, slabsided and stunted. I don't promise to get on well enough to match the other, but I'm going to make a try for it all right, or I wouldn't have taken up the name again."

"But Hardscrabble," said Joan, "that sounds more as if it went with the scrub-tree. Halfway goes better with John Wisdom."

"Hardscrabble suits me, all right, old or new name, it's Hardscrabble for me every time."

She saw she had probed and hurt, and the woman's heart of her sprang quick to her lips to atone.

"Pheobe didn't tell me about it, really, so I didn't know I was saying anything wrong. Would you mind telling it over to me now?" asked she.

So he told to her all the sordid tale of his own young life, of his mother, and of his father's sad and pitiful end. And because his tongue had been loosed in that bitter encounter of the night before, he told it in ready speech, with

an easy rhetoric of expression, new to her, but that seemed to fit him like his new garments. Of his determination to own again the old place, he spoke also, but not of his struggle with the master over it, for he also had caught what it meant to uphold the honour of the name, nor would drag it down before another, no matter how his wounds might smart or his wrongs cry out for such revenge.

"I'll give you lots of luck on it all," she said with girlish lightness, to lift the soberer mood. "We'll miss you dreadfully, but we've got to go on, you see, even if we haven't got a chance like you have; but I shouldn't say that, because just being here at all is the loveliest, most wonderful thing for me. What I meant was that yours is a boy's chance, and mine is only a girl's that doesn't have any real venture in it. I suppose I must go now, for Uncle Garret will be waiting, and so thirsty. Just one thing more—*do* you know what it all means about us being so thirsty, the thing that makes him want it so, and drink and drink till I'm frightened, almost? Cousin Alexander said it was something the Wisdoms had. Do you have it?"

"A touch of it perhaps," replied he reluctantly.

"I have it too, and it's a lot worse than it was first, because I was not really and truly that way till I came here and saw him take so much, and then I knew I'd been thirsty myself always, too. Sometimes my throat burns and burns when I can't get it quick, and when I come down here where the spring is so full I feel like drinking it all up to see if it would really be enough, for once. Alexander said it was only the men who had it, and he didn't think it was very bad, but it is.

"You've no call to have it; the Postmaster's right. It's only the men are touched. There's a verse about it——

" 'Son's sons and daughter's sons'—it says."

"O, yes, I know that too, but what made it come, first, and what does it truly mean?"

"I don't know the story very plain," said he, troubled

at her concern and belief in the strange abnormality. "It was a drink of water some of the men-folk away back wouldn't give, to a gipsy, I guess, and so the gipsy put a curse on us——"

"A *curse!*" cried she. "O, not a *curse* on our dear lovely name! O, that is dreadful! Don't you know any more about it?"

"Not a thing. I'd heard of folks being the worse of liquor, but 'twas a new song that anybody could be the worse of water. I never even heard tell of the thirst till I came here to Halfway, and then almost before I knew it I had kind of taken it up myself. But you've no call to feel it, if it's only the men-folk who were touched."

"I have, though, and so has Lisbeth——"

"Well, that proves it's silly for us to think it's a special thing on us, for she's not the family, even if she is at the Island now."

"Why, so she's not!" said Joan in relieved tones, "and maybe I could get over it. But a *curse,* Pelig. I never heard of a *curse* except about witches, and devils, and things, you know. O, I can't bear to think it's that!"

"I'll tell you something," said he, "that I wouldn't have maybe mentioned only for you feeling so bad about it all. Do you remember that day I met you girls on the Island road, and I was going to see old Jem, the gipsy, who died, you know, next day? Well, I asked him about it, and he didn't seem to think I better believe in it too much, and kind of argued I could knock it off, now, all right, while I was young. He was a great old crone to talk, and what he said sounded kind of more weighty there alone in the woods, and he the last one of the tribe."

"I wish I could have seen him! Phoebe was going to take me, only he died. What did he tell you to do to stop it?"

"He said it fastened itself most on those who had done dark deeds, or had broody minds or cankered hearts. I remember

his very words because I wrote them down afterward so I wouldn't forget them, for he gave me what he said would be a charm to keep it off, and it was this, that if you were happy, and did good deeds, and had a cheerful way, it would lose its grip on you. I wrote it all out so I'd have it by me—'good deeds and a singing heart.' It sounds good, don't you think? I never heard before about a singing heart, but I guess it's the kind you've got, so you are all right."

"It sounds perfectly beautiful, Pelig, and I'm going to say it over and over, but you see it means we've got to *be* it, too. Just saying it over won't help us."

"I reckon they'll soon need to say something to keep them from being thirsty down at the Island. Their well has just about gone dry, like it has twice before since 'twas dug. There's no rain water for their tanks, either, and I don't know what they'll do if it doesn't rain soon. I was down to say good-bye."

"O Pelig, and you saw them all, the darling things—and I can't go!"

"Why not?"

"Well, because we're not friendly, you know, and Uncle Garret doesn't want me to go there."

"You went the day Mrs. Wisdom came home, to get the doctors. He didn't try to keep you back then, did he?"

"Why no, he told me to go, and to go quickly, and he was so nice and kind when I got back, and had some of that good tamarind drink all ready for me."

"Then I'd go again, and get some more of it."

Joan laughed, but sobered again. "He wouldn't stand it, I'm sure, for he said I couldn't. And I do so want to see Lisbeth. Was she better, Pelig? She was up in bed that day."

"She's downstairs now, but has to keep quiet for a lot of weeks, they said. You and she could have had good times together, and it's right down mean you can't have them. Guess what Mr. Amsey Wisdom gave me—twenty-five dollars,

in new bills, and all laid out in a folder. I fought against taking it, but you know that easy way of his. 'O shucks,' said he, 'why, what else were folks made into families for but to give each other a boost when we need it? But don't you waste one cent of it,' said he, 'or I'll haunt you so you can't sleep! Just keep it on hand so you won't feel a pauper,' and he'd hear no more words about it. Me with a folder of bills! Why, I'll lose my head if I don't look out."

"O, no, you won't, because you've got to keep your singing heart, and that will hold you steady. But it was dear for Uncle Amsey to give you so much."

"Miss Orin too had a present. She had a pile of fine white handkerchiefs all marked with 'W', for her brother, but she made me take them, and promise her I'd always keep a clean one with the folds in it, in my pocket—said it would be a 'hall-mark.' I don't know what that means, but it's a go, all right, if she says so, and I'll do it sure. Gee, but that's two things were never in my pockets before, a folder of bills and a white hankie!"

"And I haven't got a single thing for you," said Joan in rueful voice. "I feel so mean, for we ought to do more for you at Halfway where you've been so good and kind to us all."

"You don't have to, for you see it was Halfway gave me my start, and you more than any of the rest, so you've done enough already; and I'll always feel it was mostly you who helped me fight to set my father's name up in the world again."

"But it's nicer to give something you can put in your pocket, that you can see, and feel of, and use; and I'll send you something, Pelig. But I'll tell you what I'll do now," for there had come to her a fresh thought with the mention of the father who had failed to give his son a foothold for a crown of remembrance—the thought of the struggle the son might have, if he had in him that father's weakness.

"Let's both of us promise, right now," she said, "that

we'll drop all that dreadful old thing about the *curse,* and the silly fancy we have of believing in it, or thinking we've *got* to be thirsty! Will you do it? I'll dare, if you will, and we'll fight and fight it, Pelig, with every bit of strength we've got in us.

"Will you, truly, truly promise?"

"It's a big contract, and going to be a tough one to carry through."

"I know it, but we've got the *charm.* And I'm not going to believe it was a *curse,* anyway, but just a silly old gipsy notion. Let's shake hands on it, right across the spring. I'm not afraid, for I'm going to win out, with myself and the help I can get. Pelig, wouldn't it be splendid if we could break the whole thing all up and get Uncle Garret over it, too?"

"Reckon we hadn't better tackle anybody but ourselves at first go off," said he. "Far as I've noticed he hasn't what the old gipsy called the singing heart. But you have, and I'll promise you. I'd like it pitched off my load, all right, for I'll have drag enough without that on."

So across the old Halfway Spring that had bubbled up its sparkling water for generations of Wisdoms, the two young orphans pledged their word, to break, within themselves at least, the bands of the strange malediction that had followed so many a one of the race with its uncanny spell—"fastening itself most upon those who from doing of dark deeds had cankered hearts and brooding minds."

And when John Wisdom had carried up the brimming pail to the garden gate, he went out from Halfway.

"O, dear me," thought Joan as she went on up the garden path. "This has been an awfully lonesome and hard day, and I wonder if they're all going to be the same. And Aunt Hetty never to come back, and Pelig gone! Whatever will we do without them both!"

But when she reached the house there was great news for her ears. Uncle Garret had announced that from now on

he would be dining and having his supper with her and Phoebe, at the big round table.

"Says it will be less lonely for you," sniffed Phoebe as she detailed the orders to Joan, "as if there was nobody but you around to be considered, and as if he'd done nothing all his days but regard other people's feelings! If I hadn't known he was such a good provider I'd think he was coming to spy out the land, to see what food you and I had to eat; but he lets Halfway be run with a generous hand, with plenty of everything, and enough over for a dozen who might drop in; it pleases his grand idea of style."

"He must be feeling better; and maybe, Phoebe, he is going to get all well again. Wouldn't it be splendid?"

"Two straws on a stone don't make a duck's nest," replied Phoebe, "so don't plan on us having any less work to do waiting on him. He'll manage to wear us out between dawn and dark, same as ever."

"If he would only be like he was that night of the party, it wouldn't be so hard to do without Aunt Hetty. He's never been that way since, has he? He must just have forgotten himself that time. He told such funny stories; he was adorable, that's the very nicest word I know to call him that night, because it was such a surprise, wasn't it?"

"You'll not be apt to look upon the like again, so don't get up your hopes. Lay his place careful, and everything to his liking, that there'll be no row first go off. We don't want to have high words, with Hetty so lately out of the house."

But when Phoebe had drawn his chair out to the table, and taken her own seat opposite him, there was trouble brewing at once.

"Jo-ann is mistress at Halfway," announced he. "Her place is behind the tea cups. Go to your proper place, Jo-ann."

She hesitated, scarce sensing what he could mean; and Phoebe herself did not move.

"You heard me, Jo-ann," said her great-uncle.

Phoebe's face clouded with smothered wrath, but with a fine assumed air of lofty indifference she rose and went around to the side cover that had been laid for Joan. "Go take your seat at the head of the table," said she.

"Not at the head of the table. I sit there," declared the Master of Halfway. "I'm not dead yet, nor buried, and while I live I am at the head of my own table. Do you understand? She sits in her Aunt's place. Go to it, girl, at once."

Joan went. But her young eyes were beclouded with the tears she was fighting back, and her small hands fumbled over the service. As she set out her great-uncle's tea cup, and lifted the cream jug, its contents spilled under her trembling grasp, and the curbed tears would then have fallen fast but for sudden remembrance of his admonition about the pouring of the water.

"Pour high, and you'll not dribble; pour high in all you do."

Quick as it came to her aid she obeyed its dictates, and the old sharp, shrewd eyes watching her, noted it, the change of movement, and the result, both upon the cream and the girl herself. She straightened in her chair, and finished the pouring with a pretty and a brave grace that pleased him immensely.

"I can't make it very good, yet," she said, passing his own over to Uncle Garret, "but Phoebe will have to teach me how," holding over a second cup to the dethroned Phoebe.

"No, thanks," replied that worthy, curtly. "I'll brew and mix one to my own taste later on, and meantime drink water that I suppose I'll be allowed to pour for myself, helping drain the spring dry."

"Ha! Ha!" chuckled he, but did not further express aloud the satisfaction he felt in her downfall from the seat of power, nor the pleasure he derived from noting the poise of Joan. "Gad," said he to himself, as he watched her.

"She's the making of a fine woman. Most girls would have slobbered over, or sulked, or funked outright, but she rose to it gallantly! Just like Joan when our mother died, just like her for all the world, taking her place so proud that first night, white faced, but steady, as if to say, 'I'd be a poor daughter of the house if I couldn't carry on what has fallen to my lot to do.' "

That memory brought others, past, and with them the shadow of the present loneliness, the problems, too, that stretched ahead; and though Joan asked him some questions he answered them briefly; the usurped one spoke not at all; so the meal was silent, save for the necessary meagre civilities of service.

Joan cleared it away herself, no sight of Phoebe about; brought up the fresh water, read to Uncle Garret, lingered later about the west room where Aunt Hetty used to sit and sew; still Phoebe came not. But later on, when Uncle Garret had been made ready for night she heard her come out from the wing rooms, shutting the door behind her with a sharp bang that sent an echoing ring through the lonely space, ascending the stairs with resounding tread.

Joan had herself gone up to bed, sitting awhile to think, as she often did before undressing, in front of the big window that o'erlooked the lane. But when the steps went past her door she ran out quickly and overtook Phoebe, slipping her young slim arms up round the broad shoulders.

"Phoebe, it wasn't my fault," she cried, "and you've just *got* to be good and love me, for there's only us left now."

"There's more than myself has to be good," said Phoebe curtly. "And I'm the smallest part of who's left at Halfway, if to-night's a sample of how things are to go."

"I don't care, you've got to love me, Phoebe," pleaded Joan. Phoebe went on her way, unresponsive to the pleading.

But after Joan had fallen asleep, a light fitful slumber that was broken with the strange and sad sights that had

come to her young eyes these past days—little Aunt Hetty upon her narrow bed carried out of Halfway, the cold dark grave where they laid her, all the cruel and earthly mystery of Death—she suddenly waked from out the troubled pangs to hear a low sound within the room, like a chair rocking back and forth in rhythmic motion. And by the bright moonlight saw Phoebe, rocking, and singing with low cadence the dear hymn that had been sung downstairs when Aunt Hetty was being carried away:

"There is a la-a-and mine eye hath seen—"

crooning soft through some of the dear and precious words; out clear again, in treble pitch, through the stanzas sung that day, and on into a third which Joan had never heard—

"There sweeps no de-e-es-o-lating wind,
Across that calm serene abode,
The traveller there a home may fi-i-ind,
Within the Pa-a-ar-i-dise of God,
Within the Par-a-a-a-dise of God."

So soft the singing words yet so triumphant their calm assurance, calling her fearful thoughts from earth's claims away, up to Aunt Hetty's new-found home on high; all that had spread between, of dark, and dread, and quiet chill clay, now with that radiant glory fraught. Hushed and comforted thereby, she accepted it as the singer had proffered it, without comment; and with no further fears slept the long night through, untroubled.

CHAPTER XXIX

STORIES OF THE LOOM ROOM

WELL along in the forenoon, when Joan judged that Phoebe had come to a leisure hour in the day's operations, she sought her out.

"Phoebe," said she, "will we go in the loom-room now?"

"Well, I've been invited there once already, with my appetite all whetted for it, and then had the door slammed in my face," replied Phoebe, busy at a bureau drawer within her own bedroom. "I'm not much for warmed over dishes myself."

"But I do want to see everything so much, Phoebe."

"You're free to go in and out as you please, but it's no more toothsome to me, now, than shoe-peg sauce that's all skin and stones once the juice is out of the barberries."

"But Phoebe," urged Joan. "I don't believe I can wait any longer for it, and I do wish you would come, so we could see it together."

Phoebe's attention was arrested. "Wait any longer!" she echoed. "You don't mean to tell me you've not yet been inside?"

"Yes, I do mean it. I waited for you, you know."

"You're the oddest freak I ever heard of, if it's true. Hankering after sight of it so bad that you climbed the roofs to get your first peep, and coveting it so afterwards that you braved your Uncle's temper to get the key, and yet not set a foot inside it for over three weeks! I can't believe it. I've not so much as shaken the knob of it myself, to see whether it was open or locked, but I supposed you were

in and out at your will. I don't see how you ever kept away."

"I did it for you both," explained Joan, by this time back in her own bedroom, with Phoebe a half-loth follower across the threshold. "I did it for Aunt Hetty first," said she, standing back against the old door. "You know what I told you, that she had promised to have it opened up and to let me learn to weave, and so it seemed as if I shouldn't have got it, myself, while she was away. And then—when I told you that, and you didn't like it, Phoebe, and she came home so sick that I knew she would never go in herself, why I just thought I'd keep on waiting, till it seemed perfectly right to me to go. But there never has been a real chance till to-day, has there?"

It was the Phoebe of the rocking-chair, repentant though not admitting it in speech, who stepped across beside Joan that they might enter together the broad low door of the old chamber. And it was a mellowed Phoebe who took the young girl around it, from homely treasure to treasure, telling of their uses or their associations, such strange and new things which until that other day's quest had never met Joan's gaze or ken.

Phoebe mounted her in correct position upon the bench of the small loom, sitting up beside her, explaining the mechanism of the old structure, the harness, the yarn beams, the heddle eyes, and how to tramp the treadle, till Joan felt sure she could move it herself, and keep it at work, too, when once it should be put in running order and "a piece set up" upon its yards. All the while, though, her eyes were often turning across the room where sat the big old one with the cloth already upon it.

"Why couldn't I learn on that?" she asked. "It will take us so long to get yarns to set up a new piece on this."

"It's too big for your arms, as yet."

"But the cloth is so pretty, and I could do it, I really believe, now," and she was down fleet from off her seat and

up upon the other, running her fingers through the stretching threads above.

But Phoebe was as quick behind her, sweeping her off the long bench and upon her feet below before Joan had even time to protest.

"We'll do no weaving on that loom, and it's no use mincing matters any longer, either, now that the place is yours," said Phoebe. "That's what we call the 'unlucky piece.' Six people since it was set up have tried their hand on it to weave it out, and been dead before 'twas finished. Maybe there's nothing to it, and maybe there is, but here's the piece, and up in the graveyard are those who dared to toss the shuttles. That was why your grandmother Joan had the small loom built. Her father wouldn't let her touch this big one, and she wove fine things upon her small one, linens and woollens both. She was crazy about it, riding horseback and weaving, always at one or the other thing, till she fell in love and ran away and left her loom and her horse, and Halfway that had been so proud of her."

"It looks so new, though, where the dust is brushed off, see! And they're such lovely colours, Phoebe! I don't believe it can be so old, and I don't see how it could give what you call that bad luck when it hasn't any life itself."

"Maybe it can't, but I'm not the one to tempt its power, nor shall you, since you're under my care now, even if you are mistress of Halfway.

"As for its being new looking and bright, that's because we got the colourings in those old days from the Indians who knew the roots and barks through as slick as if they followed a dyer's trade,—butternut for browns, wild indigo for blues, and logwood dye stuffs that would make a poppy blush for shame. I expect the yarns are rotten, maybe, and moths may have got into the web here and there between the folds, but the colours haven't faded a shade from the day they were dipped from the pots."

"Who died, Phoebe, for weaving on it?" asked Joan, her voice dropping low in the dim and shadowy room.

"There were some you wouldn't know of, women who used to go out weaving. But there was your Uncle Garret's own mother, for one, and the second wife after her——"

"The gipsy wife?" interrupted Joan. Phoebe ejaculated her surprise. "What do you know about that?"

So Joan told her of the tomb-stone in the old burial-ground, and without doubt gave news to her listener, for Phoebe dropped upon a seat in her surprise, and asked many a question.

"I see where there's a visit to the graveyard due me," said she, "and Nat will take me up on Sunday coming, if I can get him word."

"'*The gipsy wife of Uriah Wisdom.*' Somebody's been playing tricks up there, or paying off old scores. I'll be able to know which, when I see it. I suppose it's no harm to tell you about her. You're growing up into a young woman soon, and if you are to stay on here will have to get more or less acquainted with the family history. I don't remember seeing her myself more than a few times. She belonged to the gipsies who came every year to the beech grove, was born when they were in camp here, and your Uncle Garret's mother had a christening for her, and gave her her own name, Joan, to add to the Meg or Polly or whatever other gipsy one they tucked on. Whenever the tribe was here she got a lot of petting from the Halfway folks, and once or twice she was left behind for a winter, learning housework, and to read and sew. When the woman she was named for had her last sickness, the girl took almost all care of her. Deft and handy I've heard them say she was, too, about the nursing, and fond of the two children, Garret and Joan; and when the end finally came she stayed right on as housekeeper for a year or so, then suddenly she and the old Squire surprised everybody by getting themselves married. He was ailing somewhat in his head at times and nobody

could manage him well as she could, so it wasn't a bad thing to have her there at hand. The children didn't properly sense it at first, but soon as they got a bit older Garret took a dreadful dislike to her, and Joan began to feel the hurt to their pride that a gipsy girl should be her father's wife, and they set themselves against her so that it wasn't a happy life for any of them—though the woman was kind to them all, I've heard say."

All at once Joan remembered the coloured print she had seen upon the wall, of the gipsy band at their noontide rest by the wayside. She hunted it up and took Phoebe around to view it. "Must have been hung here by the woman herself for a memory of her old life," said Phoebe, and the thought of it made her seem a vital presence there, the quick mind of Joan's picturing her as plain as if she stood with them now in the old chamber.

"Tell me every single thing you know about her," begged she. "Did she weave on this big loom?"

"It's too long a story for one telling, but you'll get it here and there as time goes on. She was happier after her own child came, though Garret and Joan didn't take to her, a dark-browed, black-haired little thing, all gipsy, except her eyes, but the old Squire doted on her."

"O, Phoebe, I just knew this dear room was full of stories as well as all these other lovely old things. I wish you hadn't any work to do, so you could talk and talk. What became of her, and the little girl too? Would the other gipsies come to Halfway to see her? To think I never even saw one in all my life, and now I'm finding out there were some right in our own family. Would you think Uncle Garret would mind if I asked him about them? I'd love to hear about that little dark-browed girl. Would he tell me?"

"Would he?" sniffed Phoebe. "Well, if you value our peace you'll let that subject alone, nor let him know you've even heard of it. He told you to hold your tongue as to the

room and all it contained, stories or whatever else you find here. There was a picture of the little girl used to hang down in the drawing room, beside the big one of Garret and his sister now over here on the wall. The old Squire had the artist come out from Halifax and paint the whole family. The big one up here, and a small one of the gipsy and her child, disappeared from downstairs when Garret came back to Halfway ten years ago, and nobody knew nor dared to ask him where they'd been taken. But the day I crawled down through the skylight I soon saw where one of them was. Likely he might have destroyed the other. Orin is the proper one to remember tales of the old life here. I was back and forth, but younger.

"Now go on through the place by yourself, for I hear a call downstairs. It's your own quarters, anyway, not mine, but I'll help you clean it up, and I know where I can get the yarns, all ready to set up a plain piece on the little loom. George's mother will come and give us a start on it, for I've most forgotten myself. But stay away from the other, that's all I have to say, and once ought to be enough to say it, after what I've told you."

"I suppose I will," said Joan, still lingering by the big brown-beamed structure as if held by some strange fascination. "But, Phoebe, I can't understand it, how it ever got to be unlucky in the first place."

"If people understood about luck and ill luck there wouldn't be such a thing known. I can't tell you any more than I've heard. The two women who were here weaving, one after the other, were taken sick, and died. And it made the story go round the neighbourhood so nobody else cared to go at it; then the Mistress herself said she'd finish it off, but she too was stricken, so after that nobody could be got to undertake it, though the word went round at the time of the gipsy woman's death that she too had tried her hand at it, but I doubt that, though a gipsy wouldn't be as afraid to chance it as some of us might, for they are born fatalists."

"I'd like to see the cloth spread out," said Joan, still fingering the old web and blowing from off it the heavy dust. "Such a pretty stripe of blue and red, Phoebe, and started so long ago too; it's almost like a story book, itself, isn't it? I think I would like to have a dress off of it, to make up to it, you know, for having to wait here in the dark so long. Would it have been planned for a dress for my grandmother, that other Joan, do you think?"

"Like as not. It's as fine yarn as I ever saw spun, and would have been as smooth as any web on a shop shelf. We all wore home weaves when I was a little girl, but soon got onto shop stuff. Now they are starting it up again, and I hear that Annabel, that is George's mother, has got out three pieces, though only plain weaves."

"Maybe she would finish this one out for us."

"Maybe not! Halfway is spooky enough of itself with being closed so long, and all the old stories about Joan's eloping, and the gipsies, and plenty beside; and to ask anybody to come here and put their hands at anything so unlucky as this piece of cloth has been, is asking what you know wouldn't be granted. Get your mind off it, let it be here as a kind of relic of old days, and a memory of your folks long gone. We'll clear up the place bright and nice, and once the dust and dirt are out, and things in order, with the sun and air flowing in, you won't dwell upon it so much. Tell me what you want cleared up, and what you don't. I run the rest of the house, but this and your own chamber are your property, though if I were you I'd begin at that long closet under the eaves."

All the next hour Joan wandered about the old place, eager and joyful in her explorations, now a drawer pulled out in the tables, here a survey of the eave-closet, there a lifting of old chest covers for a peep within, up on a chair to the high narrow casements of old amber glass like those in Aunt Hetty's bedroom, these so thick with the dust of the long years that scarce a ray pierced through.

But oftenest she would find herself drawn to those two things, the big loom and the portrait of the radiant youthful figures of Uncle Garret and his sister. The figures seemed inmates of the room, everything else old around the great house, and only these young, with her. And scarce knowing it herself, she began to build a new Uncle Garret from out it, an uncle with a young man's handsome grace, and the chivalry of a protecting arm within his heart.

As the noon horn sounded, with its winding call, came a twinge of remorse that she had stayed there all the hour away from the wing rooms where he must have needed her. But it was hard to leave the place. "Good-bye, dear things!" said she aloud, to the two in the portrait, tossing up a light kiss from her fingers as she turned reluctantly away.

"It's all lovely but that big unlucky loom," she thought. And why must there have been that strange haunting story so that she must ever feel the awe and dread of it, just as the awful curse of the thirst hung forever now about the dear fine family name, and the spell of his harsh moods upon handsome Uncle Garret. If only the spell of all three could be broken, then there would be easier solving of the rest of the problems in the days ahead.

Uncle Garret was already in his place at the table when she went down, making no comment upon her absence, he and Phoebe engaged in the proper price and value which should have been put upon Phoebe's small property in the recent assessment roll, when they spoke at all. But for the most part the meal was partaken of in silence, the shadow of Aunt Hetty's departure still heavy upon the household, though no word of it passed their lips.

"He wants you with him this afternoon," said Phoebe, as she and Joan cleared away the meal. "So, as I've nothing special on my hands I'll clean out the loom room. If you'd rather be with me to see that I carry nothing away, I'll not go at it, but otherwise I'll have it all dusted and shining by night, for Amanda has no other special work and

can scrub the whole thing through. It's too dirty a place for you to roam about now. I notice your dress is all dusty and marked. You'll not know it with to-morrow's sun shining clear through the windows, though it's a westering room and will show up best at sundown. Is it a go, or not? The place is yours and you've the say over it."

Joan laughed. "It's a go," said she, "and of course I wish I could be there too, to help. But don't really put it in order, Phoebe, because I'd like to do that much toward it myself, to pay up, you know, for the having of it. And I'll like to find out things for myself, as I keep on exploring."

"I was expecting that," retorted Phoebe. "You've got that failing of the family, all right, not trusting to others to do your work or your planning for you."

"Why, Phoebe, I didn't mean that you couldn't do it right."

"O, I'm not offended this time. You simply meant what you meant. I haven't been born of the Wisdoms not to know their ways. I've my own share too, maybe, and I see them beginning to stick out all over you, young as you are. If you were older, now, you'd be thinking I couldn't even do the labour part as good as you could, that I'd raise more dust than you would, and all that sort of foolishness!"

Joan was beginning to understand Phoebe a bit, and she made no reply, for however prickly or hard she might appear to-day Joan knew it was the same Phoebe who had sung her asleep last night, and so she just gave her a quiet smile and went on into the wing rooms.

But in the early evening when Uncle Garret smoked and dozed she stole up to her "westering room." The floor was scrubbed and sanded, the window panes clear and shining, no trace of dust on table or chair or wheel, the long closet beneath the eaves cleared of cobwebs and lint, everything fresh and sweet as soap and water could make it—all but the big black-beamed loom which still held its heavy coating of

dust—the small one rubbed and polished like the wheels, but this shadowy old unlucky one untouched.

The sun cast down its rays through the mellowed glass in colours of amber and rose, the portrait glowed like life, but that big old dark structure was a part of the Past, was enveloped in the mystery of Death, and Chance, it "ate up the light," and all the treasured other things within the chamber. The coloured threads stretched up upon the yards, lost their gay tinge; the stripes upon the beam below, their bright hues; and there seemed to be forms flitting about it, seeking to weave the strands but dying instead.

It troubled her, the ill-omened thing, as the story of the 'thirst' had done, and she beat her young heart in protest against them, her keen, clear thought to their solving, but gained no comfort; for there was the loom and the piece of cloth upon it that Phoebe, for fear of Death, had not even so much as touched; within her own small throat was burning a great craving for the water she had denied herself that she might keep her tryst of honour with the boy; and now this treasure-house she had so coveted for her own was marred by the ugly scar of boding portent that lurked about the old loom's shape.

"I'll lock it in for to-night," she thought, and turning the ponderous key she made her way downstairs to where Phoebe was, at her knitting.

"I want you to tell me something, and I want to tell you something," said she, sitting in the little low chair where she had often sat while Aunt Hetty matched and pieced her squares.

"Well, ask on, and let me do my talking while I'm in a plain place," said Phoebe, "for presently I'll be fashioning the heel and won't have wits for aught else, then that will be your chance for your own story."

"Phoebe, I want to know about my grandmother Joan. I just hear little bits, but don't know the real whole thing."

"You'll only get more bits, from me," replied Phoebe,

"for she only lived around these parts till she was nineteen. I was younger than she was and my home being way down river I didn't see her often. She rode a black horse of her own, and a bright blue habit, and was a gay picture round the countryside."

"Does that picture of her up in my loom-room look like her?"

"As like as it could, and she was about your own age then, I'd judge."

"O, I wish I could have seen her."

"Well, go look in your glass; you're another of her in feature and general make-up, but she had the proud look of being well kept and at the head of things, where you've been tossed about here and there with nothing much to call your own," said Phoebe with bluntness.

"But don't be cast down because you've had lack of luxuries," added she. "You've had experiences, which are worth far more to you; the tossing about with people has taught you how to get on with them, and to find a flower blooming no matter how waste the wayside. I've noticed that, and I guess I've given you enough rough rubs to make it only fair I should tell you this, though as a rule much praise isn't good for us. Joan Wisdom, having had things mostly her own way, thought she ought to be allowed to marry as she chose, and in spite of Garret's and the old Squire's objections to the half-cousin from the Island, ran off with him, and her father refused to let her back, or to will her any of his means, giving all he had, instead, to Garret. Of course that will was made before he married the gipsy girl.

"I've heard it said that in his last days he drew up another one, giving Halfway to her, and only some outlying lands for Garret, because they had a bit of a quarrel over something one day. But that's only hearsay. and he'd have been in his dotage all right to do it, for Halfway should properly go to Garret, his son, a man of the name, who could carry it

on as it had been run for nearly a hundred years before him, instead of to a lot of gipsies."

"But I thought you told me she was a good woman."

"She was, according to her ability, but she could never have handled Halfway, and if it had been all left to her she would likely have had the whole tribe of them up here in these fine rooms and living off her bounty. But she died herself, only a few weeks after her husband."

"Because she tried to weave on that piece of cloth, Phoebe?"

Phoebe caught the eager note in the voice and noted the intense expression upon Joan's face. "Now don't go fussing round about that loom," said she, "you take things too deep down. I told you what was known about it, and that you best not meddle with it, and since you may not think my word is enough, I'll tell you now that it was your Uncle Garret himself who forbade you touching it and ordered me to see that you didn't. It's just the same to-day as it was in the Garden of Eden, forbid folks something and they want it. You've all the other things in the room at your hand. What makes you hanker after that old loom?"

"It isn't hankering after it, Phoebe. It's because I hate to think about there being anything sad and dreadful in my lovely room, and I don't want to believe it, for how could there truly be anything in that pretty cloth to make people sick? Do you really believe it?"

"The real common sense of me doesn't, nor the part of me that trusts to a Power that guides us all. But we're queerly made up, and there's something in everybody that stands in awe of a mystery, and though I don't admit even to myself that the old web of cloth up there has any power to cause my death, yet I wouldn't want to risk it, in dare-devil fashion running my head in the way of bad luck, seeing as I've still hopes that Hannah may give up living, some day yet, and Nat and I be keeping house up on the Hill Farm!

"Now I'm done talking," she added, "for I'm coming into

the narrows, and if I don't keep a sharp look out at the wheel I'll get off my course and more stitches one side than the other. It's your turn now for what you wanted to tell me yourself. I'm done with my story."

Joan was not half satisfied, nor a quarter. She wanted to ask about the little girl, that "dark-browed, dark-haired little thing all gipsy except her eyes," who must have once played here at Halfway, in and out the big rooms. What had become of her when Halfway was shut up so long ago! She would have liked also to hear more about the girl who had been a runaway bride, like the first one who had come there on a black horse with a rose upon her breast. Such a lot of stories there must be yet to hear, and only Phoebe to tell them, unless, as Cousin Alexander had said, she could hear them from Uncle Garret or lovely stately Aunt Orin. And her very own mother and father, too, somebody must know about them— Would Phoebe, she wondered, and longed to ask, but did not, knowing from previous experiences that if Phoebe chose to talk, she talked, and if she chose not to, no persuasions could induce her.

Moreover it was time for the water to be brought up, also the evening reading hour was approaching, so, reluctantly, she dropped the other subjects, and ventured to speak about Phoebe's presence in her room the night before.

"I never, never had any one sing me to sleep in all my life," she said, her eyes partly upon the woman and yet out on that far gaze that gave pathos to her glance. "I've often heard them rocking and singing to the children, in places where I was staying, and wished I could have had a mother to do it for me. And, Phoebe, *couldn't* you come again, sometimes, just while it's so lonesome?"

"I maybe can, and I maybe can't. Take it when I come, and make no comments. I hate things worn to a rag by talking about them," replied Phoebe, and bent again to her knitting, a finality in word and tone that her little listener well

understood, for she turned away, even though she fain would have had a promise, instead, to rest upon.

But though Phoebe gave no assurances, yet often of a night, after that, when Joan would be lying still, in that first delicious drowse, waiting for the little quivers of consent 'twixt brain and body for repose of action and will, she would hear the footfalls across her room, and presently some low old-time refrain with soft sung words; so lulling and satisfying the melody that scarce ever did she hear it through to its close—the woman who had never known children to brood at nightfall and the girl who had never heard a mother's rock-a-bye song, giving and taking from each other's robbed and lonely lives.

CHAPTER XXX

AN ISLAND LACKING WATER

JOAN was in the wing room, waiting for Uncle Garret to finish some letters which presently she would be taking to the office to mail. Things had not gone smoothly with her through the week past. The unlucky web of cloth upon the big loom bothered her. She had opened wide the door on the morning after the cleaning of the room, deciding that never again would she lock it, but the thought of the tales Phoebe had told her of those who had been taken by Death because they had dared to weave upon the piece, seemed to cast an ominous gloom throughout all the place.

"I don't believe a word of it!" she would say over and over as it recurred to her sight or thought. And yet there was the big black old shape, with the bright hued threads glowing from out the darker woof, and the dust of years and years upon its frame because Phoebe would not risk even touching it!

Hours she spent within the deep closet, sorting its littered contents, yellow covered Chamber's Journals, Penny Magazines, and many another, which would complete the files Uncle Garret was having her make of the accumulation of the years agone. And she planned to have a good surprise for him when she should have these all arranged to add to his own, breaking for that once the order he had given her with the key, that she was to speak of nothing within the room.

In the drawer of a table was a collection of odd treasures —shells and pictures, gay beads, with odds and ends of much else that seemed to her as if they might have been

playthings for a child, and she wondered if the little gipsy one had played with them there while her mother sat and wove upon the fatal cloth. Even the lovely picture she had made in her mind of the grandmother Joan sitting in her gay gowns at the smaller one, faded before this other which seemed to so dominate the place; and battle though she would against it, she could not seem to rid herself of its spell, for there was the loom, and to go in, or out, she must pass it; while not being able to talk with any one concerning it, left her mind more wrought upon by the old tales.

"I can't say a word about the room. I'm not supposed to know about the thirst and the awful curse. I can't go to the Island, nor ask about Uncle Amsey nor Aunt Orin, nor Pelig, and it makes me so afraid I'll say something wrong that I'll soon hardly dare to talk at all!" thought she as she sat watching Uncle Garret write his letters. "Even Phoebe has to be spoken to just right, or else she might go away. And I have to be so careful not to make Uncle Garret cross for fear I'll be sent away myself, that I'm just tired to death watching out for so many things!"

Uncle Garret, sealing his two letters and turning his chair to give some instruction concerning them, met the troubled look upon the young face, born of her thoughts. It moved him to an unusual utterance of concern. "Are you not feeling well, Jo-ann?" he asked.

He had been hard to please, this day. Her eyes had smarted several times with tears that did not fall, her voice vibrated with suppressed retort, and he had observed it with an inner compunction, for well he knew her value to him, how capably she undertook and carried through many things that gave him satisfaction; her small hands so deft over the tasks he set her, her head and heart working together giving her a poise that had oft compelled him to admiration, and always stirred within him a longing for

her good will but without seeming power to draw it forth, so chained was he with his harsh and bitter moods.

Her own longing for his love would easily have expressed itself in words, had she only been sure of his. Once when the roses had been abloom, she had come on tiptoe within the rooms, from the outer door, thinking him perhaps asleep, and saw him with his face bent over the bowl of them that sat upon his table, his arms around them as if in caress, saying aloud so that she heard, "O, you beauties, will I ever get enough of you!" She had told no one, but the picture of it had stayed with her, put away with those other two compelling ones that had so moved her to compassion and admiration. And sometimes when he seemed hardest to get on with they flashed upon her. She saw them now, as he turned toward her with the unexpected interest displayed in the words with which he had questioned her; they seemed to break down the barrier, and before she had stopped to consider the consequences, she had spoken to him out of the tumult of her ponderings.

"I'm all right, thank you," she said. "But, Uncle Garret, what makes the Wisdoms do so many things different from other people?"

"Such as——?" said the old Uncle, in sharp authoritative voice, the tone that always seemed to her a threat of something harsh to follow, that would sting and burn. This time it stung her to combat, though she had not asked her question in such a mood but from sole desire of comfort for her troubled thoughts.

"Well, that's one of them, Uncle Garret, the way you spoke; you can kind of knock people down with words. Phoebe does, too, often, even though she's so good other times, but she always says they're just 'Wisdom ways.' We don't have to have them, all, do we, unless we want them?"

"You have as many yourself, girl, as I ever saw crowded into any one Wisdom being," said the old Uncle. "Every

gesture and movement you make, the tones of your voice, your step upon the stair; and that fine scorn in your eyes, which only makes them bright, now, may develop as you grow old and be the glance in mine that you say people are afraid of."

"Then I'll kill it out," cried she, "and all the others that are bad. Why couldn't we keep only the nice ones! There are lots of the 'ways' that I just love."

"And how are you to know and cull the bad ones from those you 'just love.' Shall you be the judge for the family?"

Joan's eyes smarted, then she brightened. "We might tell each other, and if you told me nice, Uncle Garret, I don't believe I'd mind, for I'd love to fight them out, the bad ones."

"I'm not with you on that bargain," said the old man curtly. "But it's none too soon for you to be searching out your own frailties, and much more becoming to confine the search to yourself, Jo-ann. But why not like our characteristics? To me you are far more interesting because you do possess them, the ones you 'just love,' and if your eyes are open so early to what you think are 'bad ones,' you stand a good chance to overcome those, unless circumstances should mould your life in a hard way, to crush out the lovely traits."

"Why couldn't we fight the circumstances, too, Uncle Garret?"

"You're up against a big task, and an old one, as old as humanity," said he. "You are bound up with all your ancestors, and have their make-up. Battle away if it pleases you, on yourself, Jo-ann, but not upon me. I got you for company and for help, not for reformer, you understand."

Joan winced at the rebuke, and rose in defence, to maintain her attitude. "I am beginning at myself, Uncle Garret. I'm killing out the being thirsty. I'm not letting myself have a drink any but the three times a day. And

that's another of the things that we have to have, isn't it? No other people drink like we do."

"Stop," said he, striking his cane upon the floor as he spoke. "What do you know about that, and why should you think one person drinks more than another?"

"Why, I thought you had to be thirsty if you were a Wisdom, that they all were, because of—the *curse,* Uncle Garret," said she, her voice lowering upon the dreaded words. "And, O, I hate it so, to have anything like a *curse* about my own name—couldn't we get rid of it, some way!"

Garret Wisdom's face flamed with anger. "I presume you've Phoebe's wagging tongue to thank for that idle talk. I'll send her from Halfway before the night comes on, poisoning your mind with gossip and lies."

"O, but it was not Phoebe who told me about it," cried Joan, aghast at the look upon his face, and fearful of what might follow for her daring words.

"Then who did?" asked he. So she told him, straight, all she knew of the strange thing, from what sources she had heard it, and of the compact she and Pelig had themselves made to break it up; the differing notes of dread and eagerness in her narration, and the exultation of her decision to battle and break it, showing him all too plain how deep the story of the evil spell had taken hold upon her. So young she looked to be under its strange thrall, so frail to stand out against it when he himself could look back the long vista of the years it had held him captive with its overpowing sway.

He pulled himself together sharp, for her sake, the chivalry in his old heart springing to shield her. "How goes the fight," he asked, lightly, and as if he himself regarded as trifling the import of the thing.

She heard his words with surprise; the easy kindly voice where she had expected censure or scorn, and he could note the relief upon the young face that had been so tense with her telling.

"It's not so very easy fighting," she answered him. "I came downstairs twice, last night, after I got up to bed, thinking I'd just have to have a drink, but I didn't give in. And it has only been a couple of weeks yet, so I can't expect to get over it this quick, could I? I don't want to have it, if I don't have to, Uncle Garret."

"Get it all out of your mind at once, then," said he. "One of the 'ways' you are not going to have, yourself, since you see its harm and power already. We'll not speak of it again, Jo-ann, till you are older and can understand life better. You may get off for the mail now," and giving her directions about the special letters he had been preparing, he turned to his desk again.

She knew there would be no more speech, and was relieved that the interview had not ended stormily, but felt she had not half presented her case, for not at all had she broached the tale of the unlucky piece of cloth that spoiled for her all the joy of her treasure room; and not one word had he said as to his actual belief of the old tale she had told him. Something within her there was, though she could not have expressed it in ready words, that battled against the thought of any evil power being able to send down a judgment or punishment upon those who had not themselves done the deed that called it forth. That clear little head of hers solved it thus far, and the free spirit of her race beat against being bound, child though she was, longing to have had him say outright that there was no word of truth in the story nor power in its spell.

But he had not said that! And at his own hand was the full jug of water; and always there must be the brimming pail upon the corner shelf; and Aunt Hetty had said he might die if he was kept without it! Pelig's father had died of it, though his thirst had been for worse than water! And other people must know about it, for the man upon the mailcoach had said over the queer verse—"*Sons' sons and daughters' sons*—with that other part of it that

she could not hear through the whirr of wheels and clash of hoof. What could the rest of it have been, and who would know it to tell her?—and at that the rebel in her rose again to quell her dread. "Anyway, I am not going to have it myself," thought she stoutly as she went down the steps, "and Pelig shan't have it, for it might stop all his chances. I'm going to fight it, and get it out of the whole family, in some way! If Cousin Alexander is alone in the office, I'll ask him about it again!"

But Joan was not to get to the office that day, for at the bend of the road Phoebe overtook her. "I'll take the letters," said she, "and wait out the mail. It's through-train day, and probably late at that, and would be a long spell for you to be hanging around the office with men-folk. I have to go to the store and to make a call or two, so the time will pass quicker for me. You kick up your heels a bit and stay out in the open. You're mewed up too close, waiting on your Uncle Garret, and now on the top of that you shut yourself away in that loom-room. So stay out in the sun a while, now, and get the cobwebs and dust out of your mind."

"But, Phoebe, Uncle Garret will be left alone."

"He'll not suffer for that, long as he doesn't know it. What you don't know, you don't have to reckon with. If he thought nobody was in call at Halfway he'd want more things than the two of us could fetch him in a week, and want them bad; but not knowing we're both out, the chances are he'll get on without needing any help, though it's not safe to bank on chances as far as Garret is concerned. But you're free for an hour or two, anyway, for I wouldn't have gone near him myself in that time even if I had been there, unless he called me. Has he water enough and to spare? Never leave him without his fill at hand if you want things to go your way."

"Would anything happen to him if he didn't have it, Phoebe?" asked Joan, walking on a bit beside her.

"Something would happen to you, if you were near by after he'd craved it an hour and been denied!"

"Do you have it, the 'thirst,' Phoebe, and do you really believe in it?"

"My thirst is for something more than plain water. I'm for tea and coffee when I want a drink. As for believing it or not, that the men-folks of the family are forever hankering after a drink and can't get enough, if that's what you mean, why, what's the use of you and me fussing over whether it's so or not so, since we don't have to be afflicted ourselves? I don't know how it ever happened that the women got left out of it, unless it was because 'twas a woman made the curse and she knew we'd enough already in the one Eve brought us."

"But, Phoebe, you don't really and truly believe it, do you?"

"Down in my boots I don't, but it's hard to pull away from anything that's come through in a family, root and stem, like that old spell has. You can kick against it if you go up higher than earth for its authority, but commonly speaking, a curse is a curse and a seventh son is a seventh son and the Devil's the Devil, and you can't argue them away. The week my father died, a white rose bloomed out in the garden, in the middle of December, with the snow a foot deep on the ground and not a leaf on the bush. And my sister once had a clock, a dead one that hadn't spoken for twenty years, sound out six strokes right where they all were sitting, and in six days to the hour her two children were killed by a waggon, right before her eyes. The rose didn't do it, nor the clock, for there's a power higher than these has the charge of life and death; but if I saw and heard those two things happen again to-morrow, I'd maybe be silly enough to think my days were numbered, even though I didn't actually believe they had aught to do with it. The trouble with you is that you take it all too seriously. Just throw them behind you, those old stories

that belong to Halfway and the Wisdom name, and live your own life as you want to, in spite of them."

"I can't seem to, Phoebe, for they are so plain to me. I never heard of things like that till I came here, and I hate to have anything bad and hard about what I'm just beginning to be so glad to be a part of. Everywhere I go in the loom-room I can see that unlucky piece of cloth, and I want to get to it so, and to learn on it instead of on the little loom, to prove to myself that I don't believe it; and yet you make me feel afraid to do it, and I hate to be really afraid, Phoebe, of just a piece of cloth that I *know* hasn't any real power to make me die."

Phoebe looked down upon the serious face, grave where it should be gay. "You're too young to bother your head about such troubles," said she, "that old room has made you spooky about everything else. What you need is young folks and sunshine. If I stuff my ears up with cotton wool I'll maybe be able to sit it out in the wing rooms longer myself, so you'll have more chance outside. I must hurry on now, but if I were you I'd chase the goslings and the calves around a while till you feel you haven't a care in the world. The goose-trough is empty, I see; the dry spell has stopped the overflow, so you can drive the flock up to the barnyard for a drink.

"I hear they had a great flock down at the Island, but most of them died in the pasture last week for lack of water. Their well has about gone dry over there, but Lisbeth is getting on fine, and can walk about the garden now, Nat says." With which Phoebe crossed the stile and disappeared down the road. "If she can't take a hint as broad as that was, then she's duller than I judge her to be," said she.

Joan "took" it, all right. Lisbeth better, and out in the garden with all those dear, sweet smelling flowers. And in the doorway probably would be Aunt Orin or Uncle Amsey! It was too much to resist, and throwing dull care to the

winds as Phoebe, good Phoebe had suggested, she hurried on to the Island road; for if she made fleet her feet she could be in that dear place half an hour or more and still be back at Halfway before Uncle Garret would have been expecting her from the Office.

It was Lisbeth who saw her first, Lisbeth whose reclining chair was each day lifted outside the house that she might have full flow of air and sunshine to aid the healing of her knee. That she would now be permanently cured the physicians had not promised, for the long neglect of what had been at first but a strain and bruise had caused graver complications, but if she could make a speedy recovery from this minor operation and treatment, another and a more thorough one would in all probability make an effectual cure.

She looked a blossom herself, within the sweet glowing garden, and Joan fell back from her after the first ardent hug, looking her over—soft white frock, dainty stockings and shoes, and around her waist a rich coloured ribbon, the same bright hue in bows upon her dark braids.

"O, you are a darling," said Joan with another vigorous embrace, "and you've got it, haven't you, the sash, you know, that you wanted more than you wanted anything else you could think of."

The girl smoothed down the gay silk. "O, yes! and I've got so much else besides, that like you I'm almost afraid to go to sleep nights for fear I'll wake up and find it all blown away. I didn't really think I ought to wear this, yet, with Jane gone such a little while ago, you know; but Miss Orin says Jane would be glad if she knew I had it to wear, and that I can show my mourning by being what Jane wanted me to me, and doing things for other people like she did for me; but I don't think I could ever pay back in all my life what I've had done for me. Joan, the only thing I didn't have, and the only thing I seemed to want even more than the sash was *you*. If you

only could have come a little while every day, while my knee hurt so at first."

"I know, it was what I wanted, too," said Joan, snuggling down on the chair beside her, "and I believe I would have run away and come, no matter what would happen for it, only for Aunt Orin. She is so splendid, and dear, and her eyes look you straight through, don't they? She said it would be best to obey Uncle Garret, and that it would work out all right, someway, if we did what was right ourselves. But I'm a runaway to-day, Lisbeth, though of course I'll tell him when I go back. I was so lonesome for you all that I just had to come, and I've only got the wee-est time to stay, so where is Aunt Orin, for I want to see her so; and Uncle Amsey, the old dear, is he in the house?"

"He's away, Joan, trying to get some men to dig a well for us, back in the pasture. They have been trying and trying at the old one and can't reach water; and, Joan, everything on the place is suffering, for we only have what we can get hauled all the long way round, though of course every day we keep expecting we'll strike the water next day. Mr. Wisdom says the well was a spring, once, and that it goes off, queer, sometimes, and then comes back again; but this summer there hasn't been hardly a bit of rain, so the ground is dry clear down to China, I guess. Is your spring all right?"

Joan only nodded in reply, sore and troubled in heart to hear what Lisbeth had told her. Up at Halfway to have all the water they wanted, and down here to be suffering for it, was hard to think of. "What do you drink?" she asked. "It wouldn't taste good, the kind you hauled. We had that at the School, till we laid the pipes and brought it straight from a lovely, cool-running brook. Lisbeth, if I could only have some sent down from our lovely spring!"

"We boil the kind we haul, and cool it in the dairy," said

Lisbeth, "and I shouldn't have told you about it at all, for your Aunt Orin wouldn't complain, herself. She says it's a poor kind of spirit in folks that makes them complain, and that the talking over it keeps you from trying to make things better. But, O, wouldn't I like a drink out of your spring; and to think of all the water that used to run away in our river while Jane and I washed! That wasn't good and cool, though, like yours is. Even the one drink I had of it that day at Halfway was enough to make me think there couldn't be any other taste so cold and lovely."

A phrase of what Alexander had said at the party, while he mixed the tamarind drink, came to Joan's mind as Lisbeth talked—that the Halfway spring had fed the two houses once, stock and all. Could it have been the Island, she wondered. And straight beside that phrase, put away in her methodical little mind, was a remembrance of the day at the spring when Lisbeth had noticed the two round places in the masonry of its walls. And another, on Phoebe's first day at Halfway when she had said something to Uncle Garret about "cutting off the Island supply for fear his spring would go dry." Joan's mind began to turn them over, all three, even while she talked, still thinking, behind her speech.

"If Pelig wasn't gone, he could bring it down every day for you, to use for drinking and he would keep the little bridge built up, too, though there's not much water now left in the creek to tumble into even if you did fall," said she. "I wouldn't dare ask Hiram to do it; he is different from Pelig, you know, but, O, I can't bear to think you don't have all the water you want, when the overflow from our trough runs off to waste. Did the geese truly die, Lisbeth, because they couldn't get any? Phoebe heard they did."

"We suppose it was that, for there hasn't been a drop in the pasture brook for days and days, and nobody to carry it to them even if we had it to spare, for Mr. Wisdom

and the boy have all they can do to look after the stock, and I'm no good now. I ought to be well at a time like this and able to be helping them out, for all they're doing for me."

"There's Aunt Orin now!" cried Joan, and flew into the house to meet her upon the broad stairs that fronted the entrance. They sat down together, just within the doorway, Joan waving a hand now and then to Lisbeth, for, though the girl heart of her longed to be out there with her, the child heart craved and needed the woman's love and counsel.

They spoke of Aunt Hetty, of Phoebe and of Halfway under her sway, of the great-uncle left alone upon Life's highway, of Lisbeth and her progress toward health, even of Uncle Amsey away upon his errand, but never a word from Orin Wisdom's lips about their sore distress for water; and Joan, remembering what Lisbeth had told her, observed it, and loved the poise of it. "It's Aunt Orin's 'way,' all right. I can see that," she thought, "and I hope it's a family way." And so, reaching up toward it, herself, she made no complaint of her loneliness up at Halfway, but told of Uncle Garret getting out for dinners and suppers; of the files of papers and pamphlets she was making for him; talked of Pelig and his chance to get some schooling, and his start in the world; and had only got half through all the lovely story of what was in the loom-room when the clock from the hall chiming out the hour told her all too plainly that her time was soon up.

The story of the loom-room had interested Aunt Orin, Joan could easily see that. They had joined Lisbeth in the garden before she began the telling, that Lisbeth, too, might hear; but though Aunt Orin asked her many a question about the contents of the old chamber, she asked never a word about the unlucky piece of cloth that had brought such sad misfortune upon those who sought to weave it out. And though it and its fateful influence, and the thirst with its dread curse were the two things Joan most

wanted to talk over, something seemed to keep her from utterance concerning them. Nor did she tell of how hardly she had won the key of the room. When the clock sounded the hour it seemed to her she could not tear herself away.

"But I must, and I'll have to run all the road back," she said, "for I never should have stayed so long, and I never should have come at all, perhaps, to leave Uncle Garret alone."

"Then you may go back the short cut," said Aunt Orin, "and I will walk part of it with you," for she saw the concern upon Joan's face, and had easily noticed the pent anxiety beneath all her words.

"Why, I thought the other road was a long one, away around by the mines, and that the Island road was the shortest," exclaimed Joan.

"It is, for the public, but there is still a shorter route, and if you will get me my stick and cape from off the rack you shall be shown it to-day, since you are late. Lisbeth will not mind a little stay alone."

"O, you darling girl, good-bye," said Joan in farewell low, to Lisbeth upon her chair. "If anybody gets sick or things get worse, you'll let me know, won't you? I'm just ashamed to have all the water we do, and you here to have almost none."

"It is an old family by-way, that we are taking," said Orin Wisdom, "the path that we young folks trod through many a year when Halfway and the Island were good friends. It would have been grown up long ere this but for the Tannery's men, who often cut through part of it to shorten their walk, though they turn off, Amsey says, before they strike in sight of Halfway. I'll go with you to the little hackmatack wood, and you can then find your way on alone, for it is but a few yards through. We just bisect the triangle that you have to walk the two long sides of to come by the Island Road."

"Was that what Uncle Amsey called the 'short cut' that day Lisbeth and I went to see you?"

Aunt Orin smiled down upon the bright resolute face. "You have sharp ears, Joan, and eyes also, and a retentive mind; perhaps also the burden of what you see and hear upon your mind and heart. Was it being lonely made you come to-day, or were you a rebel and a runaway just from sport, or was anything real troubling you, dearest?"

Joan slipped a hand in Orin Wisdom's. "I guess it was all three," she said, "and I was going to tell you all about the troubles and have you help me out, you know, but I don't believe I will, now, for you would rather I'd fight it out, wouldn't you?"

"If you think you are able, Joan dear."

"I'm not truly sure I am, Aunt Orin, but you never told me one word about the thing that is bothering you all down there, and I'd like to keep my own troubles to myself, too."

"Brave little Joan," said Orin Wisdom. "But you are young, dearest, and if I can help you when you come to a 'truly' tight place, that is what I am for. Remember that a light heart tides you over many a billow where a heavy one would sink you; so keep merry and steady, Joan, and things will shake out right."

"I'm just going to ask you one thing, Aunt Orin. Did the water from our spring ever come down to the Island?"

It was a fair question, and Joan's blue Wisdom eyes looked straight into Orin's as blue. There was no evading it, though the woman paused a moment before her answer, weighing the possibilities for the eager brain and heart that asked it.

They were just crossing the strip of land that bordered the little wood, and before them stretched what seemed a welt upon the surface of the field, an o'er grown scar upon the soft hummocky turf, and within the grove it still led on, scarce perceptible unless you knew its existence and pur-

pose, but plain to eyes that had followed its course in the years long gone.

Orin Wisdom struck her stick along the green course. "Yes, Joan," she said. "It came from Halfway spring to us, along this way. Do you see the slight rise of ground above the old conduit? They surveyed the shortest possible line, and the water never failed in flow, coming out into the old stone basin in the brick-paved yard, and overflowing by pipes again to the cattle trough."

"But why doesn't it come now, Aunt Orin?"

"It was cut off, dearest, when Halfway was opened up, and we'll talk no more about it now. We have a well, since then, for our supply."

"But your well is dry, Aunt Orin!"

"We are digging another," said she brightly, "and now here we are at the wood. And I must leave you. Long years it has been since my feet have strayed even this far on the old path. Follow the welt straight on, and you will be at the spring before you know it, and up at Halfway. I am glad you came; it has done us all good, though I'm sorry Brother Amsey was away. He craves to have you with us and often makes big threats to go up and steal you! Even Lisbeth, much as we have grown to love her, can not take the place in our hearts of Phil's dear grandchild. And if you are steady and true, I think you'll see all the old troubles over, some day. How dry the ground is, the very twigs crackle under our feet. I never remember but once before such a long dry spell. Good-bye, my pet."

Joan bestowed upon Aunt Orin one of her pent-up vigorous embraces. "You're so fine and lovely!" she said. "I just wish I was Lisbeth, to be there with you every day, but I'm not, and I've got to put up with it, I suppose! Uncle Garret is handsome, like you are, but he is not 'lovely and fine,' and I don't believe he'll ever want me to love him."

"Don't be too sure of that. Love is hidden away in the deepest prison house, and will batter down the bars in time,"

said Orin Wisdom, kissing both Joan's dark cheeks in farewell.

"She is just like a beautiful Queen," thought Joan as she wended her way on alone. "And never to tell me that the well was dry, and the cattle sick, or anything that was wrong! It's just like Phoebe said she was, full of strength and pride. But I never asked her if she and Uncle Amsey had the 'thirst,' or if she believed in the 'curse,' or in that unlucky piece of cloth, so I'm no better off that I was before, except that I've seen her and Lisbeth again, and been in the darling old house and garden."

CHAPTER XXXI

THE UNFINISHED WEB OF CLOTH

CLOSELY Joan followed the old swale. Here and there a young tree had grown from out it, a dead one fallen across it; in what seemed a bit of bog, though now in this dry season showing no moisture, the seam scarcely rose from the surface; but on a higher swale of ground, for a short space the place was grassy and almost green, while out in the field they had come through the vegetation had been withered, the grass stalks dry and faded.

She paused for a moment or two upon the small verdured plot, the hackmatack shade thick above it, refreshing and cool after the hurried walk through the drought-parched way. A strange torrid wave of heat had descended upon the land, the air almost empty of stir, an unusual temperature for so late a summer day, and she felt its pressure, driven on by its hot breath to the spring that she might slake the thirst it gave her.

But soon as she lifted to her lips her cupped hands from out its crystal depths, came the thought of the dearth at the Island, of Lisbeth craving it, of Aunt Orin drinking it boiled and tasteless from out a cask, and Uncle Amsey with the 'thirst' upon him, perhaps, for he was a Wisdom man, without fresh supply to quench it as had Uncle Garret. "I'll not drink any more myself, either," said she, letting spill the contents from her small hands, for with Joan to think was to act. "We've no right to have all we want, and plenty of it going to waste besides, while they haven't enough for themselves or to keep their creatures alive," and all the way up the path, and while she paused as always, to strip

through her fingers the cool strands of ribbon-grass, she turned over in her ready mind the problem of how to get it to them, but without a solving, forgetting altogether till reaching the very doorway that she was late and that there might be trouble brewing for her within the wing room.

But her luck was with her, for Phoebe had arrived beforehand, driven back by Captain Nat, who was to stay for supper at Halfway and was already in the wing room talking with his host. He had brought a basket of red apples from the Hill Farm for Joan; and a bottle of beautiful orient seeds to be made into strings of gay-coloured beads, a most unusual offering from the sad-faced Hannah, who like all the other kindred had fallen under the sway of Joan's dear, winsome charm.

"For it's not so much what she has to say, but the manner in which she says it that conquers us all," Alexander had explained to the Schoolmaster, who, laid aside by sickness, had not yet seen her. "She kind of takes us all in as her folks, soon as she knows who we are, and meets us all halfway, as if we were young or she was old and we were all going along together; eager to know about all the different ways we get our living; and scraps of knowledge here and there that I don't know how ever she picked up, being a girl and an orphan. Pretty as a picture, too, and shy enough for grace, but so friendly, so friendly and wholesome! Garret is blind as a bat if he doesn't see what a treasure he's got in her."

Even Captain Nat, aggressive and nettlesome as he often was with Garret Wisdom, proved a welcome visitor after the long afternoon alone, and as they were talking together with most unusual amity, Joan slipped off upstairs while Phoebe was making ready the tea. Red apples to eat, and gay beads to be strung, with Captain Nat's jolly banter to meet and answer, lifted for a moment the cloud of concern from her heart; but entering her bedroom she could see straight through to the loom-room, where right before her eyes was that big old

dark shape with its ill-starred web stretched up upon it. It shadowed the gay spirit with which she had ascended the stair. Always would it meet her gaze as she entered the place, and forever would it spoil her joy of the room with all its other treasures! Suddenly one of those quick thoughts, with as quick decisions, came to her, and, snatching a pair of scissors from off her stand, she crossed the threshold of the old chamber, and, reaching up to the strands that stretched down from the yarn beam, cut them across, bright-hued, and sober woof, severed them again above the woven threads, turning over and over the cloth beam till the fabric fell to the floor below and loosed from off its loom spread its fateful folds out to the westering sun.

"You're just a beautiful thing to look at," said she, "and I love you because you were set up so long ago, and I am sorry you couldn't ever get finished off! But you must have got a wrong start, somehow, and there wasn't anything else to do but cut you down, so there! And that's one of my troubles gone already."

Shaking it out, she folded it smoothly again, starting to take it away to the hall, when she noticed a paper upon the floor, that must have fallen from out it. It looked like a document, and wondering what was its contents, she unfolded the sheet and read the opening words upon the page, written in cramped and wavering hand.

"In the name of God, Amen! I, Uriah Wisdom, of Halfway."

Joan paused, and thought, for a moment. Uriah Wisdom had been the name of Uncle Garret's father, the name upon the old slate tombstone. This document was something he had written, and though the room had been given to her for her own "with all that was within it," this paper was not hers, but belonged to whoever owned Halfway. So, folding it together again, she lay it upon her table and went on with her work upon the loom.

In the eaves-closet were the cloths that she brushed the

dust from off the books, and with these she wiped the old frame bright and clean, seeing its possibilities for paper rack and bookstand once it should be polished like the small one, humming a little gay song as she worked, the troubling shadow of dread lifted from sight and thought, her joy in the possession of the place now complete.

"So I've killed off that one old Wisdom spook," said she to Phoebe as she finished a hurried recital of her doings while they put the supper upon the table, "but don't say a word about it, for I'll have to tell Uncle Garret myself, I suppose."

"And I don't wish myself in your shoes for the telling, but you can't expect easy sailing if you're going to bump up against all the family notions and traditions, though I like your pluck in getting rid of this one, for I'll confess it bothered me more than a little. How you ever thought of such a slick way out of it all I don't see. That's the Island strain in you. Halfway streak fumes and frets and cherishes a wrong or a trouble, but the Island folk cut themselves loose from such things. There's your living instance in Garret himself, sitting there wrapped up in his ailments and nursing the old wrong that separated the two houses so long ago, while Orin and Amsey have led happy lives and thrown off the shadow of it, though longing for peace and friendly ways again under all they do. I'm the Halfway stem myself and, of course, prefer it to the other; but you've them both, and I should call it as good a combination as you could ask for. I'll polish the loom down for you in the morning and we'll trim it up with a gay curtain or two so it won't know itself."

"It was only that special piece of cloth that the trouble was about, wasn't it, Phoebe? Not the loom, too!"

"Certain sure it could never have been the machine itself, for the Wisdoms wove their cloths upon it in all the years before that one unlucky web was set up. We'll let Louisa have the cloth, to give to that society in town she calls "Arts

and Crafts." It will make a great show-piece for them, and mum's the word about the bad luck; Louisa would never tell them. Here come Nat and Garret for supper, so you'll have to finish up your story another time."

After the meal was through and cleared away, and Phoebe had driven off with Captain Nat, getting a lift to the Corner to see how a sick woman was progressing, Joan made her way to the wing rooms.

"Uncle Garret," she said, standing back against the door, her hands behind her. "I've got three things to say."

The old Uncle looked up at her with a friendly glance. "I like your definite statements, Jo-ann," said he. "Most people make exaggerated utterances, and many a girl in your place would have said she had 'lots of things to say.' "

Praise and approbation from Uncle Garret! Joan's face glowed warm in the pleasure and surprise of it, and almost she wished she might postpone her telling, to bask instead in the unusual attitude of the mood. But her stories must be told.

"You will, of course, begin at the first," remarked Uncle Garret.

So Joan made her plunge. "I was down at the Island to-day."

"Had you forgotten that you were forbidden to go there?" asked he, surprise in his voice that she had dared disobey him, and at the frank and bold confession of it as well.

"No, but I wanted so to go," she said. "I was bothered about some things, and so lonesome, and Phoebe said she would get the mail, so I just ran away, quick, before I really thought much about you forbidding it, for I wanted to see them all. And, Uncle Garret, I can't keep on staying away. I think I'll have to be allowed to go. Aunt Orin is beautiful, and Uncle Amsey is such a dear, and Lisbeth is the only girl I know, and she is sick and lame and can't get up here, so I'll just have to go there to see her, sometimes."

He rapped stormily with his stick upon the floor. "A work-house waif! She would not be coming to Halfway even were she able, Jo-ann, and I wonder at your choice of her for a friend, but I wonder more, Jo-ann, at your wilful disobedience of my expressed wish."

"O, but she's not a work-house girl any longer, Uncle Garret, and she's not even Jane's girl. She belongs to the Island now, and she's not their help either. They love her so, and she has pretty dresses, and her lame knee is going to be cured, and Aunt Orin is teaching her things."

"None of which remove the fact that she is only a poor waif by birth and not necessarily improved in manners or mind by her new surroundings," said he curtly.

"Well, I wasn't so very much better. I hadn't nice things to wear till I came to you, Uncle Garret, and I had to take care of babies, and work for people where I stayed!" championed Joan stoutly, though her heart thumped with every word.

"You were yourself, Jo-ann, a Wisdom. You are forgetting that."

"I don't think I ever will want to forget that, because I'm getting to love to be one of them," said she, the wistful tone in her voice, the deep look in her Wisdom eyes. "But I can't see why Lisbeth couldn't be nice even if she doesn't belong to us. And I wish you would not really forbid me going, for Aunt Orin and Uncle Amsey are my own relations, just like you are, and why can't we all be friends and have such good times at each other's houses, Uncle Garret?"

"Stop!" said he, "you are entirely without your bounds in presuming to even speak of such things to me, let alone the advising. My ban is not altered in the least. Whenever you visit the Island you do so expressly against my wish, and if you choose, Jo-ann, to take advantage of my crippled condition to have your own will, you must expect to receive my displeasure. We will not discuss it further, you understand, but you are in my house, under my authority, and sup-

ported by my purse. We will now proceed to the second of the three things you came to speak of."

Her feet would fain have turned and fled after those cutting words and the flat denial of her petitions, but the heart of her, even though troubled, stood resolute, and she met fair his glance while she spoke.

"It was about that—unlucky piece of cloth on the big loom, Uncle Garret."

"You were told to bring no tales to me for the room. Since it was your great desire to have the place, you must accept what goes with it, luck or ill luck, also the command that you speak not of it at all; you understand."

"I know you told me that, and I kept from asking you about it to-day, when you were talking about the other things. I had wanted so to find out if you really thought it could make any one die; but when you would not tell me whether you believed in the 'thirst,' or the 'curse' that made that, why then I didn't like to ask you anything else."

"And so went to the Island with your tales, I presume, to hear what Orin Wisdom had to say about them?"

"She never said a word. I've been there three times now, but she has never asked me anything about Halfway affairs, and I don't tell her Halfway tales, either! I was going to speak to her about the cloth, because it did trouble me so, and spoiled all my pleasure in having the room. Why Phoebe wouldn't even touch it! and she said you told her not to let me learn my weaving on that piece."

Sharp went the stick again upon the floor, and as sharp his voice. "Never quote Phoebe to me. And if you got your explanation of it from Orin Wisdom, why come to me now with the matter?"

"But I didn't ask her, after all, for she had things to be troubled over, herself. They haven't any water. Their well has gone dry and the cattle are sick. Lisbeth told me about it. It's dreadful, when we have all we want——"

"Keep to your story!"

"I am, I'm coming to it now, Uncle Garret. Because she didn't complain about things, I thought I would try to forget about what bothered me, but when I went up in my room, there was the loom right before my eyes, and everything came back, and I knew it would always make me feel the very same way every time I saw it. And then, just as sudden, I thought of the loveliest plan to make it all right—I cut the whole piece of cloth right straight out, Uncle Garret, and now it's all done with forever, and O, I'm so glad!"

He looked at her in astonishment. She was growing apace, approaching him now with one and again with others of what had been evaded and forbidden topics in Halfway circles, meeting them so clearly, and seeking to loose the tangled threads instead of being caught in their fateful mesh. Yet how could a girl of her age reach such a decision as this, herself?—so strange and yet such a simple and effectual solution of the thing. While he waited to decide whether to chide or praise, he parried with her.

"And who now is to have the cloth and its ill-luck," asked he. "Have you also settled that?"

Joan brightened. "We are going to give it to a Society in town, that is starting up weaving. Phoebe says it can't do much harm divided around in a whole crowd like that," said she, the little crooked smile upon her lips, and the match for it in the blueness of her eyes that faced him fair.

"Safety in numbers!" remarked the old Uncle grimly, but half capitulating to the smile, the rebel instinct in his own heart rising to meet the daring of this young one that had essayed so bold an onslaught upon Halfway's ghosts and spells.

"I'll get the piece down now, if you want to see it," exclaimed she, catching the change of his attitude, and eager for peace and good comradeship. "You won't mind if I give it away, will you? Cousin Louisa will take it to them. It is so pretty, too, and I half hate to let anybody have it, such bright colours in the stripes——"

But he stayed her words. "Jo-ann, you are flagrantly breaking the bargain I expected you to keep when I gave over to you the room. I think you did a very wise thing, doubtless, in getting clear of the cloth altogether and thus ending your own fears concerning it, but I do not wish, myself, to pursue the subject further, nor to have you mention the place again to me. So we will now proceed with your third and last item, after which you may go, for I have letters to write. The third was, what, Jo-ann? I trust not a troublesome thing, as were the others."

"Well, I'll have to break the orders again to tell it to you," said she, drawing her hand from behind her and going across to his chair with the old folded document she had discovered within the fateful cloth. "This must have been hidden away in the folds, for I found it when I unwound the piece; and I didn't think it would belong to me, Uncle Garret."

"It has no probable value for me. We will not break the compact. What was in the place was to be yours outright, you recall."

"But I'm sure this would be yours, Uncle Garret, for it begins with the name Uriah Wisdom, and Cousin Alexander said that was your father's name."

Garret Wisdom reached out suddenly for the paper, unfolded it partly, and read those first words, as had Joan.

"*In the name of God, Amen. I, Uriah Wisdom*——" turned open the sheet to the lower fold, and saw signed the same name, and beneath it two other signatures.

He looked up quick at Joan. "Have you read it?"

"You know I wouldn't, and you haven't any right to ask me!" said she, her head held high. "I haven't even told any one I found it, for I knew it wouldn't be mine—and I wish you wouldn't say things like that to me, Uncle Garret, when we've only got each other."

It was Uncle Garret's turn to be stung. The words stirred him through, her fearless meeting of his accusation, and

the honour of her ways, so childish in impulse and yet so mature. "I forgot myself, Jo-ann," said he, finely, to match her own attitude. "I trust I may not do so again, and that we shall get on better together, since we have only 'each other.' I will not need you now, and you may have a run in the garden a while, or go down the road to meet Phoebe on her return. Good-night, Jo-ann," and he bent eagerly to the paper he was already spreading out before him.

CHAPTER XXXII

DISPOSSESSED OF HIS HERITAGE

"WE are going picking elderberries this forenoon," announced Phoebe when the morning duties were through. "I came by that way last night and the clump was black with the huge clusters of them, over-ripe, too, for the hot dry spell has brought them on early."

"What do you make out of them, Phoebe? I came by there, too, last week, and I didn't like the smell of them, nor when they were in blossom, but the berries are pretty now, all purple and red."

"We make elderberry cordial, a bottle apiece for every family of the relations around about. It used to be the old custom always, at Halfway, and when Garret came back he got Hetty to start it up again, for the elder-clump had spread over half an acre and there was fruit and to spare. It's a thick syrupy stuff, and with water added makes a fine drink for sickness. He likes it himself, and the Wisdoms need all the harmless beverages they can get hold of since they've got to drink down some sort of liquid most of the time. Did you get up a fresh pail for him this morning? He had none in his jug as I came through."

"O, yes, of course I did," said Joan, "but he did not want it filled then, and said you would do it!"

"Well, the millennium must be dawning after all, for he never asked me. But I wouldn't wonder if he could get it himself. He walked from his chair to the window last night, tolerably steady, too; I could hardly believe my eyes when I saw him start off. That's one good thing the dry weather has done, eased up his rheumatism or sciatica or

whatever he thinks it is that stiffens him so by spells. Getting in and out to meals helps limber him up, too, and we may see him stalking round Halfway by winter; he shook it off for about six months once, and was spry as a kitten, then it clamped down on him again. But he's mum as a baby this morning, and grey looking, but wanted neither of us around."

"Then, would it be all right for us both to be away?" asked Joan. "He's not sitting in a draught, is he, Phoebe?"

"Draught!" sniffed she in scornful repetition of the word. "I'm fair sick of the sound of it. If he eschewed his bad temper with one-half the energy he uses up trying to keep clear of what he calls a draught but is mostly only a breath of fresh air, he'd have outmeeked Moses long ago! You'll baby him by watching out so for him, and be an old woman yourself before your time if you don't look out close, carrying more than your own real share of life's burdens. He knows Amanda is in the back regions scrubbing up, and within call if he makes a loud enough noise. She drained off the last of the tank water this morning, so we'll have to depend on the pipes for all we use from now on. I wish it would rain, the dust of the dry things gets into my nose and throat. There was not even a drop of dew last night as I came home, and forest fires are starting up all around. Nat says a whole lumber camp burned out yesterday, down river, houses and all."

"Captain Nat is great, and knows such funny stories. It's too bad you couldn't have been married to him all this time," ventured Joan.

Phoebe tossed her head. "Marriage is not the chief end of life! I've had my hands full enough with the mess other people have made on account of it, and so don't overly hanker after the state myself."

"But there are such a lot of the family, Phoebe, who haven't—both of you, and Hannah, and Aunt Orin, and Uncle Amsey, too. Aunt Hetty was married three times."

"And no higher seat in Heaven on that account! I've always thought that a woman who has borne and brought up a family of children ought to be let straight inside and no questions asked, but there's no special dispensation granted for mere wives far as I know, though they might get a chance in on the martyr count. But the Holy Writ gives us an idea of the estimation marrying is held in up there when it says there won't be any more of it going on—like 'night' and 'weeping' and the other bugaboos of earth.

"Nat and I haven't gone about pining, nor spoiling our lives, simply because we couldn't get joined up. There's plenty to do in this world even if you can't carry out your own particular stunt, and I don't know what the countryside would have done without me all these years if I had been mate with Captain Nat, my hands full with him and 'Hill Farm' affairs. Now, get your hat, and here's your basket, and I'm for away if we want to get to the clump and back before dinner."

So it came to pass that Garret Wisdom was alone at Halfway. He was sitting before his desk, writing, his lame leg resting upon the low splint chair, and evidently giving him pain, for every now and then a deep groan sounded throughout the still room. Several times he tossed back the pen into the recess of the pigeon-holes, and leaned forward, with effort, to ease the spasm, taking it up again and continuing the writing, only to make another sudden pause at return of the twinges. Once he reached down to a lower drawer and drew from out it the document Joan had brought him, spreading it out before him that he might read it through, but got no farther than those words of the opening line:

"In the name of God, Amen," when he shoved it back again to its envelope, with a shadow upon his face. He knew its contents, though eye did not see the page. Over and over he had read it during the long night past, its words burned upon his memory.

The pain returned, sharp, like needles through his flesh, then eased away, but left him feeling weak. Twice he tapped loudly with his stick upon the floor; he would have Joan come to him and they would complete the file of old "Nova Scotians," thus relieving his strain of mind, and diverting him should the pain return.

No one answered. Then he remembered that both Joan and Phoebe were absent from the house, and just when he essayed to take up his writing again there came the sound of an approach up the lane, footfalls across the verandah, and a halting pause at the outer door.

He wheeled in his chair to face the incomer, waiting for the entrance knock. But no knock sounded, the door opened, instead, and Amsey Wisdom stood upon the threshold.

"Good day, Garret," said he.

Garret Wisdom's face turned hard and frowning. "My house is my castle till I open the door of it," said he.

"Maybe, for strangers, but Halfway is open to Wisdoms, I reckon, long as it has a door to swing in or out—if they choose to come," said the intruder in cool and easy voice.

"You presume upon the relationship."

"I'm here for business alone," said Amsey Wisdom.

"What business have we in common!"

"Quite a lump of it, you'll see, after I've set it forth, and as we never beat about the bush I'll to horse at once. The girl the Skipper gave over to us is a daughter of your gipsy-sister you sent back to the tribe."

"That's not so," said the Master of Halfway. "She married, and died, without children. I had it from themselves; old Jem knew the facts and I was in communication with him until his death," but behind his words was pressing Lisbeth's face as she had stood in that very doorway, looking into his own with the soft, calm gaze that had stirred some poignant memory within him, so strong that he had even commissioned Hetty to look up the parish that had given her the work-house shelter of her childhood. Hetty

had written him back that no one whom she asked could put her upon any clue of the child, except that she had a foreigner for a father and that after his wife's death he had left the baby girl behind and returned to his own country, nobody remembering the mother herself, since they had only tarried in the parish for the birth.

So thoroughly had this settled the doubt of the vain imagining that he had given it no further thought; the events that followed Hetty's homecoming in quick succession, completely effacing it from his mind, until the evening before when Joan had pleaded for the girl's company at Halfway, and had given him the document found within the old loom.

"It's a lie, that somebody has trumped up to get money from me," said he.

"Thought you'd say that," replied the other, still easy voiced and calm, "and knew you wouldn't take anybody's word without it was backed up by proof. So just to show you I'm not dreaming it, here's a copy of her marriage, and here's one of her child's birth, from the parish register, as well as an affidavit from the old doctor who attended her and took down some statements from her before her death. You being away at the time, and Halfway shut up, I guess it didn't seem worth while to him to do anything about it; then he moved away himself to another county, and it was a wonder we ever got onto where we could find him——"

"Say what you have to say and get done with it; don't prolong it," interrupted Garret Wisdom.

"I'll make it long or short, as I blame please, and I'll not leave till my story is through. To begin at the beginning, I suppose you didn't know, any more than the rest of us did, that Jane, the Skipper, was a gipsy herself, a younger sister of the one your father married. No love lost between you and her, I've heard, about that cabin of hers you wanted to buy from her—well, that was the reason why you couldn't buy her out. She cherished a feeling

against you for the sister's child you sent adrift—see it all now, don't you?"

He saw it, like a flash of light—the dark face, the high cheek bones, the low brow, the surly, resentful manner that had animated her in their several discussions when he had proffered her a price for her bit of land and house; so plain he saw it, that he did not in any way doubt it, but did not say so; and the other continued:

"She had notions of her own, and kept her own counsel, and I don't know that anybody beside ourselves and Alexander has any idea even yet who she was. Queer how that child should drift back to her, it's gipsy luck—over the world and back to their own again always, they say—nothing can keep them apart. And here's that little one you sent off to the gang, coming to her rights again, in her child, who will properly be heir alike with you and little Joan, of Halfway itself; for you know as well as I do that the will your father made in your favour would have properly been revoked by his marriage, if anybody had cared to protest it. So it's a long lane that has no turning, Garret."

"Hold your peace about my affairs," said the Master of Halfway. "You have no call to come here to croak to me of judgment. I have paid out more money to them than ever she would have inherited by law. You have a long lane to be returning, yourself, without trying to set me on the right track—and fifty years is rather late in the day to get at it."

"The only bone you had rightfully to pick with me was that I helped your sister Joan on to what she thought was love and happiness. You held her with a high hand, and a tight rein, and she might have done worse than that had you continued to keep her from the man she loved. Whatever else were his failings he made her happy with him till he died, and you've been living on her share of property that might have kept her in comfort afterwards."

"Silence!" thundered Garret Wisdom. "Show me what you think are the proofs of your claim about the girl, and be away. We can have no peace together after what lies behind us."

Amsey Wisdom looked upon him for full a minute before he answered, an inscrutable expression upon his whimsical old face, almost mocking, almost tender, at thought of those vanished years.

"Lord, Garret," said he, "we're a pair of old fools, aren't we? But no answering glance met his own from the grim face opposite, and his voice hardened.

"You cut off the old friendship," said he, "you scorned the ties of relationship, refused us the old privilege of way that had been allowed between the houses for a century and more, bought up all the land around to hem us in, cut off our water supply, tore up the bridge, forcing us to go fourteen miles for all we need, and when you got to the end of the string as to dark ways around here, you hunt up Joan's and Phil's grandchild and legally adopt her so you could maybe get your hands on the Island property when we are gone, through her!"

"You did not come to speak of the Halfway household, I assume," said Garret Wisdom. "You are away from your story."

"Same old fashion I always had, and it always bothered you, didn't it? The process of my mind that would jump the brooks instead of following up their course like yours would, in proper sequence and all that kind of thing," said the other coolly, his eyes roaming about the room with feasting love in their depths, love's vision long denied—upon the wide fireplace with its time-stained stones, the portrait above it of Garret's grandfather and his, out the windows where the old garden blossomed, and the path stretched onward to the spring. He had not been inside the place in all the years since he and Garret had been young to-

gether; and scarce a day before that, from five to twenty, that they had been apart to its close.

He had thought, as he rode upon his long way round, that perhaps the call might bring about a reconciliation, their first meeting together for forty years and more; had pondered upon the things that separated them, dwelling upon the possibilities of companionship that might still be theirs in the years yet vouchsafed; had thought to go on, from the first blustering announcement of his news, to reasoning it over, together, perhaps. But there sat the other before him, his face immovable as stone, his eyes pitiless and scornful, his voice masterful as if castigating a cringing witness.

The hungering longing look fled from off Amsey Wisdom's face. "Damn you," said he, from forth his vexed and pent-up spirit, "far as adopting goes, two can play at that little game. Orin and I have adopted Lisbeth. Yes, I thought that would surprise you a bit, maybe," as his listener gave a start at the words, "and I'll tell you how it came about, and then I'm gone quick as ever I can get out, for I'm done with you forever.

"Jane brought her down to the Island once when she came on an errand, three or four years ago I would think, and she looked so like somebody we'd seen that we could hardly believe she was a stranger. Orin has sharp eyes and ears, like Halfway side of the house, too sharp for peace of mind, and I like our half-shut ones better, myself; but when the girl came again, that first day little Joan stole down to us, Orin got it into her head that she looked like the family, and began to wonder what her real name was, and where she had really come from. Jane had asked Orin if we would take her, if she should die sudden, and bring her up with us, so when that time came round Lisbeth was brought to the Island; and in one of the chests which Lisbeth had was a sheet of paper written by Jane telling who she herself was, with some addresses and dates that we judged might be connected with Lisbeth. We've followed them up, by

letters, and I've been down myself to town to see the old doctor; and Lisbeth is the child of that little sister you cast adrift from Halfway. That's a truth, all right."

"Yet sounds still like a make-up," said Garret Wisdom curtly.

"It's a well fortified one, and knowing you'ld be doubting it, I had these copies and certificates made for you. I judged you would perhaps like to know about it yourself before it gets around the country. We have not told her yet."

"Buying me off, I presume! If you have finished your tale, you may go."

"None of that!" spake his visitor. "Keep phrases like that for where they belong. I'm asking no favours. I'm simply giving you your chance, that's all. As for leaving, I'm going when I'm good and ready, which will be when I've told you that in the doctor's letter he said that Lisbeth's mother had wished her baby called Wisdom—queer she would have wanted the name after all she had borne through it, but she did, and so Orin and I concluded we would let her have it proper and right, by law, giving her a chance to inherit with Joan what we have at the Island when we are done with it all. Though she's not little Joan with the dear ways, she is next best thing, and makes us think of both Miriam and your grandmother, Garret. She can't go round the countryside looking as like as she does to the family, now that she is housed and dressed in gentlefolks' ways, without the story getting out, and as we've nothing to be ashamed of for our part of it, we'll let it be known after a bit. That's all I have to say, and I bid you good day, Garret," and he swung wide the door and went out, leaving it open behind him.

Garret Wisdom reached out to the table, eagerly, for the papers the other had thrown upon it, his mind and heart a tumult within him, wrath at the intrusion, scorn of the uttered statements, yet a strange terror of their possible truth; hot anger at him who had made them striving with

the old remembered joy of his companionship. Even while he read the written words, fraught with such import for him, he was hearing over again the tones of that easy, lazy-going voice; seeing that inscrutable smile that had always covered such undiscovered delights of jest or story to pique the speech; listening meantime with his heart's ear, for the outgoing footsteps down the garden pathway. Then swept, in spite of himself, out of the tumult of burning thoughts within him, he pushed and jerked his chair forward toward the open door; obstructed in his progress, rising from off it outright, pulling himself on by stick and stay until he could watch that solitary old figure making his way down the long lane.

At the flower garden he paused, leaning across the fence with roving glance as if seeking for something there that he had known and loved.

"Lady-delights, I suppose! He was always a fool about that bed of Lady-delights," mused the watcher, giving sway to the strange anomaly of mind that could thus detach itself from all at hand that held for him such fateful purport.

Where the path struck off to the spring the wayfarer stood as if irresolute, starting down upon it a few steps, then returning and pursuing his course; touching with outstretched hand as he passed them the pine-tree trunks, something in the action smiting the eyes that watched, like sudden blinding pain. It had been an old trick of their boyhood, the two of them, to run up and down and in unbroken beat never to miss a tree tap, thus earning a "wish" at the end. Shut out from the long lane so many years, the gesture must have come without the man's own volition, scarce conscious himself of the furtive boyish passes upon the soft-brown boles.

"Blast him, he never grew up—nor had anything hard to meet," said Garret Wisdom. And just as he knew he would do, saw him mount his horse and ride away; the gate, as

the door, wide open behind him, with never a look back at Halfway.

With his passing, the strange mood dropped from off the watcher, and he made once again his slow and painful progress across the room to his desk, picking up the copied letters by the way, and reading them through thrice over; brief statements, but undoubtedly valid by the signatures attached, with no flaw to mar their value. Then he reached for the old paper Joan had brought him, and spread the sheet out to his gaze, saying over its contents, in low voice, as he read, as if to need the spoken words to verify their import.

"In the name of God, Amen, I, Uriah Wisdom, being "of sound mind and memory, do make this my last Will and "Testament, and hereby revoking all other wills by me "made, do give, devise and bequeath my lands and premises "known as Halfway, together with all personal property "contained therein and thereon, to my Wife, Miriam Joan, "and to my Daughter, Joan Wisdom, their heirs and as-"signs forever, share and share alike . . ."

The last Will and Testament of his father! And by it Halfway was his no longer, had never lawfully been his own! His hands shook that held the sheet, his voice trembled that read its lines, the very spirit within him tottered before its significance. The outlying lands that he had purchased and added thereto were still his right; the thousands in bonds and banks that he had himself accumulated; but Halfway, with its broad surrounding acreage and its grey-gabled roofs, had passed from out his hands, to child and grandchild of the two whom he had set at naught.

As he had pored over it the evening before, it had held no such present vital issue for him. Retribution, he had read, in the irregular faltering hand that gave back Halfway to those sent forth from out it, but since they both had long passed from earth there would be now only Joan, he thought, to be lawful claimant, and he would himself settle

with her for her portion, soon as he could think it over and come to a decision as to a just and proper equivalent. Thus disturbing though it had been, and a shock, to learn the contents of the old will, yet it had not then touched his inmost being; but now the thing was as a flaming sword that cast him forth from all he had loved, to own no part nor parcel ever again in the home of his fathers.

He read it over once more, pondering upon it. By the date it must have been drawn up only a few weeks before his father's death; at request of the wife, doubtless, and hidden by her in the old web of cloth until she should decide upon a proper time to bring it forth. But her own death had been a sudden one, and in that fateful web the thing had been prisoned all the years since, waiting till little Joan should travel across a continent to set it free. As he thought it over he marvelled at the strange fine honour that had constrained her to bring it to him unread, a child brought up as she had been from pillar to post.

He had somewhat accustomed himself through the long night's reflection to yielding her share to Joan, in proper time and manner. He had meant to do well by her in any event, in spite of his protestations to the contrary, leaving her of his means enough for fitting support, for, since she would be rightful heir of the Island heritage, she would not need Halfway for a home.

But here was another heir, a work-house waif, claiming to be descendant of that gipsy wife, and by that could demand a like inheritance with Joan. "Share and share alike," of the great house and its grey old beauty, while he must pass from out its doors forever. It could not be true— The whole thing was an imposture— And he read over again the copied statements, but even as he read her face came before him, as she had stood in the doorway and met his gaze, her dark soft eyes travelling about the great room—that trick of her head turning like a bird, as his grandmother Wisdom's did, as if always she said by it, "Tell me quick what you have

to say, for in a trice I'll be flying away again." He had seen it plainly that day, he knew now, but had not placed it quite, only startled by the familiar movement, and the blue-black hair above her shadowy eyes. There must be other traits as well, for Amsey had said she could not go about the countryside and people not know her name—not all gipsy, then, if the other strain was coming out this strong.

The little step-sister came back to his mind, dark, soft-eyed, like Lisbeth's own gaze had been that day. She had cherished a strange fondness for him, following him about the house with her first early footsteps, and ready at his hand, often, when older, for any ministration she could render. But the sight of her swarthy face had in somewise always irritated him, and he had never responded to the loving attentions, rendering to her only necessary care; though had always been able to read the longing look in her eyes, so that on his return to Halfway he thought he saw it in the portrait of her that hung in the drawing-room beside that other one of himself and his sister, and he had carried them both away to the old loom room, hanging the small oval one of the child behind the other, that they might not meet his gaze in his new occupation of the home.

It would have been bad enough to have her child alive, and known in the community, the old tale passed round the countryside, with some natural claim for support from him perhaps, but to have her down at the Island with Amsey and Orin, adopted by them back into the very name, and inheriting a half portion of the Island property that he had hoped by his own scheming adoption of Joan might ultimately pass back to the Halfway holdings, was bitter bread to eat, even without the existence of the will. But now by this writing to have her joint heir, with Joan, of Halfway itself—these two orphan waifs who had knocked about the world, homeless, penniless—and he whose proudest consciousness had been that he owned it, to be dispossessed! The thing

was preposterous. He crumpled the paper tight in his hands and bowed his head upon his staff.

The red coals upon the hearth could have burned it to ashes and none been the wiser. Beside himself no one knew of its existence, for Joan had not read enough to judge its import. The witnesses were long dead. But just as he had kept his hands from off the bags of gold dust his dead comrade had left behind in the frozen Klondike wastes, without trace of temptation to touch, so now with the same unhesitating instinct of honour no thought of destroying the instrument or denying its validity even entered his mind. Bitter he had been 'gainst those who opposed or sought to thwart him, scornful of weak or tender ways, covetous for the old holdings and scheming and harsh in his methods of attaining them, but never dishonest nor outrightly unmindful of the claims of actual justice, or the law's behest.

The struggle had not been over a decision, but to adjust himself to the shock of the knowledge, and to wrench his spirit free from what he had so cherished with all his inborn pride. Halfway should be theirs, he would yield it up without a murmur. But he must have time, to face it squarely. And hearing the voices of Phoebe and Joan as they passed the wing upon their return, he smoothed out the sheet and placed it in its covering, enclosing with it the statements of death and birth that Amsey Wisdom had left behind him.

CHAPTER XXXIII

WOODEN WATER-PIPER

"NOT much luck I see," said Orin Wisdom quietly, as Amsey rode up the bridle path late on in the afternoon. "We can talk it over here on the garden bench while Lisbeth is having her rest within. How did he take the news?"

"He never took it at all, far as you could tell by appearances. What an armour he's put on around his real feelings! He never changed countenance but once in the whole interview, nor faltered in his gaze. But I gave it to him, root and top, stuffed it down his throat and came away. He can have a while to digest it. We'll keep the story a bit longer, I guess, but he's as headstrong as ever."

"Phoebe and Nat think he is changing some, of late. Either Hetty being gone he feels his dependence more, or it is Joan and her own sweet ways, or his lameness easing up a bit, perhaps a Higher Power bringing it about through all three means."

"I wouldn't like to think of what he was like before, if he's supposed to have changed for the better now. Hard as a rock he is, and scornful and impudent—and yet, Orin, I can't ever get over that old affection I had for him always, and the hankering for his company that has followed him all the years since we parted ways. Not having wife or child, nor even school children like you had, nobody has ever taken his place, and I don't suppose there was ever a mail-day in all that time he was away from here that I didn't have a longing kind of expectation there'd be some word from him. I don't sit down and dwell upon it, as

you know, but it's been underneath everything else, and made the time go slow, some way, though it's curious, too, how the seasons do carry you on from year to year, with some special interest in each."

"I confess I thought you would come to terms through the interview, either from the emotion of the meeting together again up at old Halfway, or from a downright fight over the whole thing, and a consequent settlement. I suppose you weren't half spunky enough," said Orin Wisdom with a glance half-loving and half in admiration. "That has always been your failing, though it has not hindered you from having the good will of the whole community."

"And I'd a blame sight rather have that than an overdose of spunk like the Halfway family always had. They made me clear sick of it—you got a touch of it yourself, Orin, though you've not the venom of theirs. But I guess we'll continue to worry along without Garret, since we've Lisbeth now, and I don't believe little Joan will stand it long to be separated from us all. Wonder what she'll say when it comes out about the relationship. She seems to have taken a great love for her from the first. It's good law, all right, that the marriage made null and void the will that gave Garret everything, and I told him so. He thinks he paid off any such claims, to the gipsies themselves, and has eased his conscience that way, if he's got any. He's so proud of Halfway that he'd never yield up jot nor tittle of it, likely, without a stiff fight, and we'd hardly advise Lisbeth to do that. The bitter pill for him to swallow is to own her, and to have her down here, the story coming out through us, but we've given him his chance, and if he doesn't choose to take it, then we'll tell it ourselves, when and how we please. He never liked the gipsy wife, nor her child, and he'll probably not take to Lisbeth."

"I defy him to see her and not love her. She has so many points of the family, and but few of the wild race, and seems to have been drawn to Garret with a strange sense

of longing admiration even on her one visit to Halfway. She has the look of the little Miriam in her eyes, though hers were bluest blue while Lisbeth's are dark, but it is that sunshine in them and their soft, compelling gaze that attracts and will always win her friends. Garret disliked the gipsy wife largely because she was no housekeeper. He had an innate love for perfect order and system, and how could a girl whose sole idea of home had been a campfire in a dingle, carry on a great house like Halfway? About the only things she took to were the weaving and the flowers; and between these and caring for Uncle Uriah and the child she had small chance to really learn housekeeping. If Polly Ann's romantic story about there having been another will made were true, it would show she had evidently cherished a love for Joan and influenced him in her favour again; but give Polly Ann a verb and a noun and she could always make up its object, and a story out of it where nobody else could see it, so I have never given credence to that tale. Gipsy Joan, as we girls used to call her, was tall and dark, with a gay vagrant grace about her that always made me think of the hollyhocks up their straight stalks.

"Lisbeth has that gipsy grace, and beauty's clear claim, and I dare predict that she will win Garret over if she is given the chance."

"Why not tell her all about it now? I don't feel like myself the last week or so, and may be going to have a spell of sickness. I'd like to see the meeting of those two girls when they first find out they are kin. We could get word some way to Joan, to come down. I believe I'm getting tired of waiting for things to work out; I'd like to bring something to pass myself. The two of them could then go up together to Halfway and Lisbeth face him out."

"Not just yet, Amsey. Her being brought to Jane, and then on here to us, without either Jane or ourselves directing it, is so clearly part of a purpose and plan that I hesitate to meddle too much with it ourselves. What you did to-day was

between you two men, and proper enough, but we'll wait a bit now to see what comes of that before we make our next move. You are worn out with the unusual heat, brother, and the strain of the drouth. Will the men come to-morrow to start the digging in the pasture land, and do you think the divining rod pointed fair?"

"Fair as we can tell until we try it out and disprove its dip. The spot is in the lay of land where the little brook used to run. I guess you are right, I'm getting almost discouraged about striking it; and carrying back and forth from the casks to the two cows that are ailing, rather used me up last night. But it's no use hiding it, being inside Halfway again has knocked me out on the top of all else. That broad old fireplace and grandfather's picture there above it brought back old days so sharp that I came near making a fool of myself before that cuss of a Garret who sat through it all so cool and masterful that I could fair have choked him."

"And fallen upon his neck with forgiveness the moment you lifted up your eyes and saw him afar off!" said the sister fondly. "I'm not alarmed over any vengeance you threaten to wreak upon him."

He laughed his easy lazy laugh—"O, well, Orin, there has to be both kinds of folks, to keep the world moving round, and I never could see much use in holding grudges longer than was necessary."

"You did not of course mention our difficulty about the water supply?"

"Not I! I wouldn't give him that satisfaction. I have got a spark of spunk after all. But to be up near Halfway spring, out of the dry time we're having here, and not get a drink from it was clear torment. My feet almost pulled me down the path and it was like hauling two hundred of stone to get myself back on the lane again, and out, without a swallow. I haven't the 'thirst' as I've heard Garret has it, but I've it bad as I want it for comfort's sake, and it seems to me the last few days that nothing I could ever

drink again would satisfy me but the water from that spring. All other is flat, beside it. Do you remember, Orin, how it used to splash over the big stone basin sometimes, out in the yard, when we were youngsters, all over the hot bricks, and we'd pad around on them in our bare feet?"

"I remember, Amsey," said she, with half sorrow in her proud old voice, "but we won't dwell upon it now. Did there seem any signs of a break in the drouth as you rode along? We are so shut in here with trees that I scarcely can observe the conditions."

"Not a break, far as I could see. The mill pond has shrunk to small pools, and the sedge grass showing all along the creek bed. A hot wind, too, that was raising the dust in clouds and whipping the leaves to ribbons, along about noon, but it has died down now; and there's that old sun, blurred-red, and like a ball of fire even as late on in the afternoon as this is. Rain! Why, there's not a rain cloud in sight as big as a fly's eye!"

"O, well, we must take the saying Lisbeth got from Jane, the Skipper, 'To-morrow will be a new day,' Amsey, and we have fresh buttermilk in the dairy, so we'll not fare so badly. I hear Lisbeth moving about inside. We are better off than Garret is in his great house, with his crystal spring, for we have no remorse in our hearts nor fancied wrongs to brood upon. I fear these days ahead will be grey ones for him, while he fights out his battle about acknowledging her."

They were indeed grey days for the Master of Halfway, and the props seemed to be dropping out from beneath him as he dwelt upon all else that must come to pass with his acknowledgment of the girl's relationship. Restless, he changed from reading, to writing, or to overlooking of his crowded desk; talked sometimes with Joan; but for the most part bade her and Phoebe go about their own pursuits, leaving him alone with his thoughts. It had graven its mark already upon the stern old face, a careworn weary look,

and in his manner a grave concern utterly free from petulance, or carping speech.

Joan's quick sense noticed the mood, and meditated upon its source. It could not be from pain, for he was having strange relief from his malady, moving about his rooms, slowly but surely, some portion of each day. Sometimes she looked up from her book to find him gazing fixedly upon her, and seldom did he make his usual comments, accepting the reading in silence. The 'thirst' too was strong upon him again. Joan had fancied, because her wish lay beneath her thought, that he had been easing up, since they had talked together about it; but if he had sought to restrain he had assuredly now returned again to its spell, for it seemed to her as she went in and out the rooms that he was always lifting or draining the dipper, and her trips to the spring were doubled.

It filled her with strange dismay to see him thus in its thralls, and thinking upon it threw a shadow over her own spirit. Moreover, the plight of the household at the Island was troubling her sore, and the sight of Uncle Garret drinking his fill of the cool water gave fresh poignancy to the thought of those others unable to quench their thirst from the same pure source.

Once when at the spring, she went across to the little hackmatack wood where the small verdured space had seemed fresher than the surrounding ground, returning across the field to follow the course of the old waterway between the two houses. Cultivation had obliterated its track, but the stoned up hole in the wall of the spring was in direct line with the wood. Her vivid imagination pictured the water flowing out into that old stone basin in the brick-paved yard, and the overflow into the trough beyond for the thirsting kine, the joy it would be to them now at the Island, in their sore dearth, to hear its plash and flow once more; the water coursing between them again, perhaps the households too

might be united; dwelling upon it all with troubled heart as she lay upon her bed that night.

"I'm off for home," announced Phoebe briskly when Joan came down next morning. "Hiram says they are cutting the grain over there, and that the family who have taken the house want to move in earlier than I had expected, so I'll have to go to look after things for a few days. I've set everything in order for you."

"A few days, Phoebe!" cried Joan in dismay. "Why, it will be so lonesome without you, and now too, while Uncle Garret is so quiet, as if he was half sick."

"That's just why I can get off, while he's mum and peaceful. He is letting me have the horse and waggon too, and I want to start out quick for fear he'll repent of it before I'm really away. I'd like to have you go along, and show you my old home, but it would never do for us both to leave him. Hiram and Amanda will sleep up at the house in case of fire or sickness; Amanda can look after your Uncle now almost as good as I can, and with much more ease to him, since he doesn't have to use his strength up talking back."

"O, I'd love so to go," said Joan, "and you will have to take me the very next time, sure, Phoebe. But I'm so glad you're not having to walk away down to get the coach."

"Walk away down!" retorted Phoebe. "What's to hinder me from walking if I chose to? Do you think the years that happen to get added onto me from time to time, are going to keep me from doing what I want to do? I don't intend to go out to meet old age, halfway, like some folks do, nor any way at all. It's got to hunt me up, and I'll whack it at every show of its face. If a crack of air is a draft, to be afraid of, then I'll open wide the door and sit in a good broad one; if I've lame ankles from a tramp one day I'll walk twice as far the next, and when my knees feel stiff going upstairs I shall run up and down till I get the stiffness out and the essential oils flowing again. I'll not be old just yet

awhile, not I! and I'm riding, this time, from clear choice, not necessity. I'm nearly sixty, maybe, but my muscles are hard as a goat's knee, and I could knock the side of a barn in if I had to!"

"It's great fun hearing you talk, Phoebe; I truly don't believe you ever will get stiff or old, and I know what you mean about feeling so strong, for I do, too, as if I would just have to have something awfully hard to do, to use it up."

"Well, you've your Uncle to tackle for a few days, and that will exhaust some of your energy. I've thought of something I can bring you back. You were fretting because you had no keepsake to give Pelig when he went off, and if I mistake not I've got something home that he'd prize all right, it's an old daguerreotype of his grandfather, Uncle Jock he was always called, taken when he was a young fellow like Pelig, all rigged up fine—gentleman style, in high collar and silk stock, a pink colour in his cheeks and his curly hair all over his forehead. Nat looks like him, I've heard. I never thought about it till yesterday when I was dusting over the lot of them there are in the cabinet here, and it came to me that you might like to have it to give Pelig, so he can grow up to it as he goes along."

Phoebe got her hug for that, all right. "O, it is just exactly what I would like to give him, Phoebe. But we ought to call him John, now, his new name, you know."

"We will when we think of it, and when we don't he'll suffer nothing thereby. One is as good as the other, to my liking."

"Yes, but you see the new one stands for what he's going to do, ahead," explained Joan. "I do wish somebody would give him a lot of money so he could get on quick instead of having to wait so long to earn it all."

"Money isn't the sole thing that gives you a place in the world," said Phoebe wisely. "Those poor rich people the Collins, who have only dollars and cents to their credit, couldn't turn a phrase at the courts of heaven or earth to

save their necks or souls, and they'll never amount to anything except being rich; but Pelig has a tongue in his head and a wit of his own to carry him on fast as he's able to go. Now I'll make myself ready for a start; Hiram has the chaise all ready. I've another thing to tell you though, and that is that I'll likely drive back around the Island and drop in to see how they are getting along there. Hiram says Orin Wisdom took to her bed yesterday, not downright sick but just ailing and weak. It's the dry weather and the sky like brass, that's affecting her likely, as it is your Uncle Garret, and will lay the rest of us low, if a downpour doesn't come soon to break the strain."

"Phoebe, couldn't you stay there and take care of them, if they need you? I'll do double of everything here if you only will."

"If I feel I have a call to I likely will; if not, I won't. Orin boxed my ears once when I went to school to her, and I've never been able to forget it. We don't exactly pull together since, though I admire her good points and her good looks; but she is so superior, O, so superior!" and Phoebe lifted her head high in such delightful mimickry of the stately and beautiful old Mistress at the Island, that Joan laughed before she had thought.

"I'm not laughing at Aunt Orin," she protested in defence, "but at you, Phoebe."

"An act that needs explaining has usually a lame leg," replied the other—but noting the desire within the eyes that shone so wistful at mention of the Island household, she stooped in unusual emotion and gave Joan a good-bye embrace that warmed the young lonely heart through and through, so that she watched the chaise down the long lane quite divested of the tremor of loneliness that had assailed her at Phoebe's first announcement of departure.

Aunt Orin lying "weak and ailing" at the Island, and no water yet in their wells! It filled her mind with concern. It beat in undertone with all else that came to hand or thought,

a tattoo of love upon heart and brain; and while she dwelt upon it a desire was born within her, daring and strong, that ere the day was half past had grown to a purpose.

All the while that she was doing what was required in the house that Phoebe kept so shining clean—all the hour she read aloud in the wing rooms, it was turning over and forming itself, a subconscious working. And when she had taken in Uncle Garret's dinner to him, as he had requested, she hurried down herself to the spring, running swiftly across to the little wood. The fields o'er which she passed were dry and brown, the sumac's foliage yellowed and falling, the wild-rose clumps and the orchard leaves curled and faded in the hot breath of the drouth that lay upon the land; but within the wood, under the hackmatack shade, was that small verdured space, stretching for several yards in length, and spreading out upon one side to where the land dropped off in ravine-like formation.

She paced it over to the spring, as she had seen the men do in the survey of the water way at the School, smiling her crooked little smile at her own short-measure strides. She hunted about for a sharp, strong limb, prodding and scratching away the moss and leafmould from the surface depth. No sign of moitsure could be felt, but something there must be beneath it, that kept the vegetation above them fresher than the surrounding stretches. She examined the plugged-up opening in the spring's stone wall.

The process of Joan's mind was direct, to determine was to do, but in this purpose that lay before her now there was another beside herself involved, and that one was Uncle Garret. She must feel and fumble her way, at first, if thereby she might engage him as co-worker. So she returned to the house.

He called to her, almost as soon as she entered, and she was glad of the summons since it served to set in motion the workings of her design.

She came to the wing rooms through the hall passage, paus-

ing for a moment upon the threshold, with that stay of motion that the old Uncle had grown to watch for, always with delight in the unconscious charm it lent her.

The sight of her appealed to him with unwonted satisfaction, battling sore as he was over the possible relinquishment of Halfway and all that it entailed of sacrifice and tradition. The pictures upon the walls, the books within their cases, the mullioned windows that gave their outlook of its broad acreage, the yawning old fireplace with its time-stained stones—the thought of leaving them, of living without them, stunning him with a dull numb protest; he could not meet it fairly, yet, and the hours passed slowly while the struggle went on.

"I called to you twice," said he; "were you out of the house? You may read for awhile now. I cannot get myself asleep, as usual.

"It's this old long dry spell, Uncle Garret!" said Joan. "Some people are sick with it, already, Phoebe says. I do wish it would rain. Won't the crops be spoiled?"

"Never allow yourself to fuss about the weather, Jo-ann. Take it as it comes. Fuss over what you can change, or hinder, or help, but not over things that are out of your power. Year in and year out it averages up all right, with equally good results in the end; a poor root crop is often a good hay one, and the other way another season; a light apple yield means better prices; the same thing applies in lumber and other commodities. It looks a small mind to be fuming and complaining about weather and crops."

"But the wells are going dry, Uncle Garret."

"Need that concern you," asked he, "since we have no fears that our spring will perish? Has it fallen any in depth, Jo-ann?"

"Not much, only down as far as those holes where it goes into the pipes for the house. Uncle Garret, what kind of pipes are they?" asked she. "Iron ones?"

He looked up at her with surprise. "What do you know about pipes?"

"I thought I told you once, that I had to help lay them, at that dreadful School; all the girls had to, in vacation time; you know we had to work out our board, all of us who had no homes nor people. The water was brought a long way, and we worked at it, just like boys. I used to hate it so, the wet and the mud, and we would get so tired—— But I am so glad now, that I did it," added she.

"I like to hear you say so," said Garret Wisdom, "and though pipe-laying might seem a strange piece of knowledge for so young a girl, I have noticed that every experience we have in life comes in again to help us through or over another. I presume that the school pipes were of metal. Halfway raised her own; they are bored or drilled logs of spruce, simple and home-grown, but very effectual in withstanding the inroads of time, Jo-ann. The pointed end of one section enters tightly into the iron bound open end of another."

Joan's mind leaped, and the puzzle of the green space within the little wood was beginning to be solved.

"Like that old hollowed out log in the corn-crib?" asked she eagerly, "and are our pipes all the same length of that?"

He half rose from out his chair at her words, then settled back again, but his eyes were sharp upon her face as he spoke.

"Since you were not reared upon a farm how would you know a corn-crib from any other of the outbuildings, and what do you know about a hollow log within it?"

Joan's own voice was still pent and eager as she answered him, as though behind her spoken words was pressing a torrent of thought. "I can't tell you how I find out things like I seem to. It's queer. I see without ever knowing I'm looking, and hear without ever knowing I'm listening. I suppose the corn-crib sounded such a funny name, as if something was being put to sleep in it, so I asked Pelig to show it to me; and it was such a queer shape too, that I wanted to

look inside of it, and I must have noticed a piece of log there with a hole clear through it, for I can see it lying there now, just as plain—but I never thought of it again till this very minute. And, Uncle Garret, it's the very thing exactly that I wanted to know, and I'm going to ask you something——"

He checked her speech with his uplifted hand. "Not upon forbidden topics, nor upon any other, at present. You may start the reading, and we will have no further talking," said he, with the old imperious tone again that had been absent from his voice in the past few days.

"O, but I can't read now!" cried Joan, all fear of him lost in her eager purpose, and Joan-fashion plunging straight into the heart of it at once. "Uncle Garret, there is a little half green spot in the woods beyond the spring. Is it a place where the pipes are parted, or where a whole piece of pipe was taken up that led down to the Island? The stuff has crumbled away a little bit out of that plugged up hole in the spring wall, and must leak through a little. Do let me dig up the place, and lay that joint down again, if that truly is the piece in the corn-crib—O, please do, so they can have plenty of water down at the Island."

His stick struck with vehemence upon the floor, as if his own speech astounded at her words could give no adequate utterance. But it did not stay her.

"They are suffering for water, Uncle Garret; the men have dug and can't get any, and Aunt Orin is half sick. Why can't we let the water go down there again like it used to, and we be friends and happy together?"

"Stop!" said he. "You have violated all my orders concerning that place. You have visited them repeatedly."

"Only three times, Uncle Garret——"

"To be exact, three times," continued he, "and that is three times too often, you understand. You have spoken of them to me against my expressed wishes, and now connive with them to relieve their troubles which they could easily

have averted themselves by digging deeper wells at the outset. Speak of them no further, now, Joan. And you may leave me until you feel quite willing to abide by my commands."

But Joan did not go. His words were sharply chosen, but the wonted cutting tone was absent again, his face grave, his deep blue eyes that had never lost their lustre with his years, holding now a sad and baffled expression that she had never seen within them. It drew her to him, her own hot feeling of desire strong within her young heart, the light that lighted her small dark face all aglow upon it.

"Let us send it to them, our lovely spring water," she pleaded. "Do you know it, the old stone basin Aunt Orin said it came out into? O, wouldn't they love to hear it splashing in again this smoky dusty day! And they never, never asked me to speak to you, nor made any complaint, nor even told me a thing about the water once coming there, till I asked them my very self. They are just as proud as—we are, Uncle Garret."

His old lips twitched at that "we," and the blue eyes in spite of himself grew tender. What witchery of mood did she have within her to choose the word, the sweet inflection of it, the linking of her young years with his old ones, as she stood before him, half woman, half child. His mother, his sister, his father, himself—he could see them all met in her dauntless gracious make-up. Yet he could not yield to her request. Soon enough Halfway and Halfway spring might pass from out his claims. But till such time as he deemed it best to make that transfer and acknowledge the gipsy's grandchild as joint heir with this Joan who stood before him, he would make no show of other yielding—and he hardened his heart again.

"Your tongue is loose to-day," said he; "it is a wise plan never to say any more at one time than you can safely gather up. You have gone beyond all proper bounds."

"I'm sorry to make you feel troubled, and I'm going to

leave the room in a minute, Uncle Garret," she answered him. "But do let us send the water down to them even if we can't be friendly. It's only a few yards to dig up, and I can roll that old piece of piping down as easy as can be, and we can pry out the stoned-up hole, for it's started already; please do say it can be joined up! I'd rather do it for you than for myself, and they would like it better too. But if you really won't say yes, then I just believe I'll—do—it—my own self."

Stick and voice alike stopped her brave pleading. "Since it would be utterly impossible for you to do the thing you purpose, I need not even take notice enough of it to forbid you," said he harshly. "Leave the room at once, Jo-ann, I am astonished at your boldness."

CHAPTER XXXIV

THE WATER FLOWS BACK TO THE ISLAND

WHEN she had gone from out the room Garret Wisdom leaned forward heavily upon his stick, wrought to his very depth by the interview and her astounding proposal, thinking upon it, reproachfully, that she should have so outraged his authority by her visits to the Island, and now by this audacious proposition. Strange it was, though, that such practical knowledge, unusual for a girl, should be hers, and the keen, clear brain that leaped so surely to conclusions and decisions, uncommon for so young a head. Bold words indeed had she uttered, yet the fresh ringing voice with its wistful cadence someway robbed them of their bold intent as he dwelt now upon them.

So she had heard the old story, and knew the Island affairs in spite of his commands. They were short of water there,—then let them dig deeper wells. Yes, he knew the old stone basin in the brick-paved yard, had played and splashed with bared feet in its overflow with Amsey and Phil and Joan, had sat upon the broad door stone of the house that seemed always to have just stepped out into the garden gay, had danced in the round parlour above, supped at the chair-table many a night, and returned to Halfway through that woodland path.

They had been a care-free and easy-going household, not carrying on their establishment with such plenty nor such dignity as did Halfway, but where in all the country could you have spent so good a time, in gay banter and happy laughter?

Amsey had it, in his speech, in the lilt of his voice, and

that boyish old face with its look of eternal youth upon it. Phil had been gay to dissipation, but Amsey had never swerved from the straight path—and if he had only not done that thing, the thing that had parted them, helping Joan and Phil off on their runaway adventure, the breach might never have come between them, nor Halfway been closed, nor his own life embittered, nor all the other fatal consequences that had followed in its wake.

Well, they were too old now to make it up, or to try to change the "spots" in their characters that Time had set so deep; it was too late; the road too long to traverse back. From some byway of the long road had Joan come to him; down another of the bypaths had that other found her way, and through them both would come, all too soon, the dissolution of all that seemed to him his being and his desire. Until that time, the day when he himself should deem it fitting season for his announcement and his renunciation, he would make no other yielding, and once and for all Joan must understand this.

After a while he called to her. But she did not answer.

It must have been an hour since he had bade her leave him. He called again. The long dark entryway stretched beyond the opened door, and the cry echoed through it, and up to the halls above, but no young feet came tripping down the winding stair, nor small sweet face lighted the dark entrance.

It could not be that she had gone to carry out her design. He lifted himself to his feet, resting upon his chair, and looked from out the window far as eye could reach beyond the bend of the path, scanning the several approaches to it from lane and outbuildings, standing so long that his limbs felt strangely steady beneath him. Once he thought he saw some one stooping and rising, by turns, upon the lower bend, but could not see plainly for the branches of the trees, and eager to prove the sight, started away from his chair outright, walking across the room, by passing support, to the verandah door, throwing wide the portal; and astonished at his new

found strength actually pulling himself across the threshold, to the outside settle seat.

A smoke-like vapor filled the land, settling down over the hills like a mantle, the sunlight shining through with feeble rays, diffused as through a veil; the stillness impressive, the thin dry air seeming incapable of motion, even the leaves upon the trees as stirless as the stagnant elements about them.

Again he thought he saw a figure upon the lower stretch of the path, approaching from the cluster of outbuildings, but orchard boughs between shut off a further view. He called once more, and reaching in toward the opened door lifted the old iron knocker upon it in a succession of raps that must have resounded throughout all the house, but no one answered the clamouring din, and the echoes died away in the stillness.

Garret Wisdom pulled himself together for a daring thing. He was going down to the spring, or as far as the crotch of the path, from whence he could plainly see the hackmatack wood. If Joan should be doing that bold deed she had essayed, she must be stopped in it at once, even if he must send her out from Halfway. He reached in the corner of the room for a second stick, a low heavy one with spreading head. The easy, broad steps from verandah to ground lent a descent not greatly fraught with pain. Some strange new energy seemed in his limbs, impelled by his spirit determined and dogged.

"She shall not do it!" he muttered as he crept slowly with his two supporting canes across the open ground to the garden. From there the course of the path lay close to the picket fence, the wide rail upon which the pickets were nailed just at arms' height, making a continuous prop along all the way. Sometimes he rested with back braced against it. Now and then he leaned down upon it to gather fresh force. Once he stopped outright, a fearful feeling within him that he would fall prone upon the ground, never to rise

again, but some power urged him on and he continued his course.

Then suddenly he lifted his head, listening intently to a sound that fell upon the dry breathless air, and rounding a turn of the fence saw Joan just within the little wood, her sleeves rolled to her shoulders, arms wielding the pickaxe, singing blithely as she bent to it with strong and practised stroke.

A wave of anger surged up through him, of hot intolerance; and then something snapped within him, and the old pulse of youth and strength beat warm once more, and what had never really died in his heart but had only shrivelled and faded, sprang to life, at sight of her there, working the work of Him who had sent her back to Halfway from a byway of the old thorny road that she might through her sweet and resolute ways break the bands that bound the Master of it.

"Jo-ann," he cried; "Jo-ann." And she heard him and came to him.

Joan thought that never in her life would she forget her gladness on hearing that call, nor her astonishment at the sight of him where he stood.

"O, please, please don't say again that I shall not do it," she exclaimed, "for it's dug a quarter through at one end already, and I've rolled down that old piping, and got a pickaxe and spade and a crowbar and mallet and enough other things to build a house and a barn, I guess," speaking with impulsive haste, fearing even yet his opposition or his hostility.

But when she saw the unusual expression of his countenance and heard his words of explanation and consent concerning the project, her joy was unbounded. The two of them were no longer to be separated in desire or intent, but working on as one in effort of its achievement. He talked over the project with her, advising as to the best means to be employed,

regretful that he could not expend some strength himself upon it, and spare her own.

"It's just exactly the right day to do it," she said, returning from the house with other implements of his suggesting, and with a light low chair for him to rest upon during his further progress across the field. "It's lucky Phoebe being away, and Hiram up in the wood lot, so nobody will ever need to know that I started out at it first myself. We can just say that we Halfway ones wanted the water to go back again to the Island in this dry spell," added she, in beautiful and utter forgetfulness of her own great part in its performance. "That was why I wanted so for us to do it to-day, to have it all by ourselves, you know. Isn't it lovely that things always work around the way you want them to, after a while?"

He looked over at her with a half smile from lips all unused to such pleasant manner of response, and Joan being wise enough not to probe further as to future events, the two bent all their energies upon the task at hand.

Rested by the way in the low chair, Uncle Garret by easy stages was got safely across the little stretch of field and established at the edge of the wood, from whence he could direct the work, would have shorter distance also to travel on again to the spring, when the time came round to open up the outlet passage.

It was going to be long and heavy labour for Joan's young arms in spite of her ready will, and Garret Wisdom, looking on, was concerned lest she might not be able to endure to the accomplishment of the task, so it seemed like a fairy tale from out a book that just when she had cleared away the moss and tangling roots from off the green stretch, she should look up and see, standing at the corner of the picket fence, Pelig, gazing upon them with wondering eyes.

Pelig, who only on the previous day learning that Hardscrabble was his own, had secured a brief release from work that he might journey thither to thank the one who had given it; had driven down with George on the early route, and

where Phoebe joined them at the corner had heard of Halfway doings and of the Master's ability to move about his rooms; had walked on across the pasture lands and up the long lane to the house, rapping at the wing room doors but getting no answer; pushing on to the side entrance had found no one within the place; passing through the passageway and venturing unbidden even to the Master's precincts had found them vacant; and wondering and puzzled over the strange absence, concerned lest it mean that some calamity had fallen upon them, had followed on to the spring whence so many times a day some one must journey back and forth to Halfway.

"O, he'll help us," said Joan as Pelig made his way hurriedly across the field. "We won't mind having him, Uncle Garret, will we, for he would never tell about it, to anybody." And she sprang forward with outstretched hand.

"We're laying a piece of the old pipe that used to go down to the Island, so the water can go there again," she said, hastily, to give the old Uncle time to decide what he himself might wish to add concerning it. "And we are so glad you came. You'll help, won't you?"

But Pelig had his own business to get through first, so all absorbing to his mind that for the time being he seemed not to be conscious of the astonishing fact that Garret Wisdom was where he was, instead of in his own rooms upon his wonted chair. He paused before him, now, and pulling his cap from off his red shock of hair, stood bare-headed.

"I came to tell you that I've only just found out about you giving me the Hardscrabble property—and I can't take it from you, sir—after all I said to you that night. I'll buy it, if you'll let me have it that way, but I couldn't let you give it to me, when I didn't even stop to say a civil farewell to you when I left Halfway."

"Nonsense, nonsense," said the Master of Halfway. "I can't have child's play like that, taking it back when it has been your own a month past. How did you learn of it?"

"A man told me that if I searched up the records I might find some flaw in the old titles, and that I could get it away from you in that way, and I sent him to look it all up, and he found it was already mine, since that very night! I can't take it, sir, when I remember all I said."

"Stuff and nonsense," replied Garret Wisdom. "We both said things. That is what our tongues were given us for, to help us fight out our battles. You proved your right to the name, by the use you made of yours, young though you were. In a long life a man may see many a deed he may wish undone, but I'll not undo that one, John Wisdom. Take off your coat, and help us on here with our work."

It was the use of the new name that settled it, spoken in the new tone, that though still imperious, rang with some fresh vibrant note of good fellowship.

John Wisdom stepped forward and lifted the older man's hand, bowed his red head down upon it with a strange old-time grace that could have been nought but a gift straight from the Grandfather Jock, gentleman in dress and mien. "Thank you, sir," said he simply. "Now for the digging!" and throwing cap and coat to the ground he bent his strength to the task within the little wood.

"Thought you were fretting because you were only a girl and couldn't do anything worth while," said he as he took from Joan's hands the heavy pick-axe and with strong strokes loosened the stones and earth along all the course that she had cleared of moss and twigs.

"I've not done very much, yet," said she. "It's great to have you help us, but I almost wish too that I could really have done it all, just to prove myself."

"You could, sure, easy as wink, but it would have taken time. As it is now we'll be through in less than an hour. Mr. Wisdom says we can saw this old joint in two and so get it set a lot quicker than if we had to dig up both adjoining ones to fit it together. He can get a new piece later on, or tar this join-up over; but the thing to do now is to get the

water through quick, for I've got to get back to-night to the river, and Mr. Wisdom wants Hiram and me to fix up the little bridge across the creek."

"So we all can go back and forth again like they used to! Isn't he splendid!"

A broad smile illumined Pelig's freckled face. "Guess you've done your share there, too, in getting the 'splendid' part brought to light," said he, "and I'll bet 'twas stonier digging than this is! But he did something fine for me, all right; gave me Hardscrabble, out and out! I'll have to tell you all about it some other time, for now we'll have to work like blazes if I've the bridge yet to fix up. The old abutments are there, and we can rig up stringers across, someway, and plank it off Amsey's pile that he always kept handy." And both of them laughed together over Amsey's shrewdness, then fell to work with redoubled speed.

"O, here is the end of the other section," cried Joan jubilantly, "and there truly is a tiny bit of a stream trickling through it from that broken place in the outlet hole! I knew there must be some water coming from somewhere, to make this place look greener than the rest."

"How did you ever come to think of it at all? He says that you found it out all yourself."

"He didn't need to tell you that, and I never heard him say it."

"When I was moving over his chair just a few minutes ago. It's only fair for you to have the credit, but I wonder how you ever got started on the idea."

"Why, Aunt Orin showed me the old path that used to run along the conduit, and I saw this place here, green, while everything else is baked up, and she said the water didn't run to the Island now, so knowing about pipes at that School, made me follow it up, someway. Then I was worrying because they couldn't have the water, when they need it so now, and all the old quarrel, you know; and when I asked him about it and he told me what kind of pipes these were,

why, I just remembered quick that piece out in the corncrib, and thought he might have maybe taken it up so nobody could get the water through secretly, though of course Uncle Amsey would never do that. I had been thinking, and thinking, but it seemed such a puzzle; and then it all just snapped together right. Aren't our minds queer things?"

"Yours is a wonderful one, I would say!"

"It's no better than your own. I don't see what we have them for unless we use them. I just had all those things stowed away in mine, and made them work together, that's all."

"And you'll be doing your big things out in the world too, some day," said he. "How on earth though did he ever manage to jaunt down here! I can't believe he did it all himself, as he says he did, though Hiram told me he was limbering up amazingly."

"I could hardly believe it myself, Pelig, when I saw him here, and I've been so excited that I don't realize it even yet. Phoebe says he got all clear of his lameness once before. But I don't think he'll be able to get back alone, he looks so pale."

"He won't have to. Hiram and I will take him up, but here is our other end free, so you go tell Mr. Wisdom, while I saw and fit it and then we'll be ready to loosen up the cement and stone in the outlet hole."

Pelig had helped him at his request to a little knoll, that he might have survey of the scene before him, the broad fields, the slope that led to the spring, grey old Halfway lifting its roofs from out the tree tops, and the high wooded hills that so effectually shut the Island from view that Joan had never guessed its nearness. His eyes, prisoned so long 'tween walls, roved greedily about over his wide domain, his thoughts long thoughts, but all revengeful brooding dropped away with that something that had snapped within him at sight of Joan digging up the old waterway. While he sat there he had made ready his own plans for the announcement of the recon-

ciliation. Joan's feet were to carry the good tidings to the Island; Amsey Wisdom was to be asked to come to him in the little wood; while soon as a temporary bridge could be thrown across the creek, Lisbeth was to be brought to him without delay, for now, while the fervour of the doing made warm his heart, now had come the fitting time to acknowledge her and to relinquish Halfway. Before he should sleep upon his bed this night the old troubles should all be cast aside and he be free to meet the new days ahead, whose span might yet yield him joy, since the allotted labour and sorrow had so filled those behind.

It seemed to Joan that her feet fairly dragged over the old pathway, for her heart outran her footsteps. But the water outsped them both, as if eager and glad to be rushing again through the old tree trunks, sparkling out once more in the stone basin, splashing over upon the brick paved yard, and o'erflowing to the moss covered trough beyond.

They heard it at the Island, through the opened doors of the house, as they sat within, and were already standing about the basin as if looking upon a miracle, when the feet of her that had wrought the earthly doing of it sped through the garden paths and out in their midst with her glad tidings.

"And an highway shall be there!" exclaimed Orin Wisdom in the oracular utterance that had so lifted Joan to her on that first day of their meeting. "It was my 'verse' this morning, and I had been thinking upon it, wondering what it held for me—'An highway shall be there, and a way' once more, between the two old homes! O, blessings upon you, little Joan!" And she was clasped close to the strong loving heart of the woman who had read too many books of life in the long years behind her not to know, even though Joan told no tale of her own doings, that it was through her the highway had been thus opened up.

As for Amsey Wisdom being asked to step up to the

little wood, as Garret had instructed, why he was up and off before Joan had even remembered the message out of all else she had to say. And there they "had it out" together, alone, under the green tree shade, with the water from Halfway spring flowing as of old for both houses, with fair speech and good comradeship once more established between themselves.

The retrospect of the drear and barren road behind them, Amsey had made a short cut across, in that delightful Island fashion that had enabled Joan to cut the Gordian knots that had so bound old Halfway. And the wall between them raised so high by Garret Wisdom through the long years past, so high that it almost seemed they could scarce lay it low again in the few that were yet left them, he overcame in the same way.

"Don't let us try to level it, or to walk back the road," said he when the other sought to explain the things that had set them at naught. "We'll leave the past alone, and just crawl under in this little opening Joan has made for us, and travel on in a new path: for our natures haven't changed in this trice, and first thing we know we'll be having a fresh row if we talk it all over. We've both erred."

"I, the most," said Garret Wisdom gravely.

"Well, I'll let you have your way about that, I suppose, but in all else you've got to give up taking the lead after this," said the other in jocular mood to lift the shadow. "And as for our time ahead being long or short, I wouldn't wonder a mite if we'd get off fishing yet, once you're really limbered up again. Remember how we used to fleck the stream together and envy the fish their fill of water day and night? Gad, Garret, but that 'thirst' we've all got is a strange thing, hounding us as it has from generation to generation. Orin has tried again and again to break it up in me, and didn't succeed. Yet here I am in sight of that old spring I'd have given everything I had, the last weeks, for a drink from, and

I've not even a hankering in my throat nor a desire in my mind. What do you make of it?"

"The same thought has come to me," said Garret Wisdom. "Except as I slept I have not gone without a drink of it for more than a half hour stretch, and now it has been hours since I've had a swallow, or wanted it."

"I never seem to have known there was a second line to the couplet, till we found it all written out on a piece of paper in Jane's old chest. Do you recollect it? *'Son's son can end it.'* I couldn't make any sense to it when I read it then, nor since, but it just came to me now that maybe you've done the thing that ends it, by sending the water to us again in our need. See! 'Twas by some one of us refusing it, in the first place, that started it, and now by giving it, and to your enemy, Garret, you've broken the spell! What do you think?"

"I suppose if we had stopped to think enough about it at any time we could have known it was foolish and needless, but it has been perpetuated from one to another, in speech and example. Even the strange 'thirst' itself, apart from any curse, could have been passed down by inheritance like any other instinct. For my own part I've dwelt upon it too much, with being away so long in lonely places, and of late being shut up by myself. Joan is for fighting it, and all the rest of the family failings besides, and I shouldn't wonder, now, myself, with other interests opening up, if we might be able to let it go by the board, and by degrees get clear of its spell. But there are other and graver matters to be spoken of now which concern others beside ourselves, and for this I must get back to the house, for I prefer to tell you of them in old Halfway itself."

So when he had been helped up over the difficult way, supported by Pelig's strong arm, but refusing outright all aid at the piazza steps, with stubborn force of will making his own mounting up them that he might return to Halfway as he had departed, of his own strength—there within the wing-rooms, upon his accustomed seat, he unfolded to Amsey Wis-

dom the story of the will that Joan had released from its long hiding.

"Lisbeth and Joan heirs to Halfway and you no title to it yourself! It's neither just nor lawful!" said Amsey Wisdom in the fervor of friendship regained. "I judged Lisbeth should have a share, somehow, and I pressed you pretty hard that day to try to rub it in you, but for you to lose it outright, it's monstrous and unnatural! Have you known it long?"

"That very night before you came."

"You blamed old beggar you, to preserve the countenance you did when I told you about the girl, and knowing all the while that the finding of her would lose you Halfway! How do you do it? You must have properly belonged to the Stone Age!"

"I had the night before for thinking upon it, and have had all the nights and the days since."

The other's old whimsical face grew light with a passing emotion of pride. "Had it, and not a soul beside yourself know of its existence, and still have it! No one the wiser if you had tucked it away again while you lived your own life out as Master in your rightful home. Yet here you are telling me of it as cool and open as though it was no more than a woodpile you were going to chuck! If you were ever charged with any wrong deeds, you've sure cleaned off the slate now by this thing you are about to do, and I wonder if it's best to carry it out this sudden, for they are mere children yet, and don't need property for some years to come."

"It shall not bide a night longer in my mind," said Garret Wisdom. "If the bridge can be put safely across so Lisbeth can be driven over, send her to us and let her stay the night at Halfway with Joan. Take the will back with you and have Orin tell her the story of her people, our own race and the wild one, and of the will as well—then when they return here we will talk it over together, and decide our course."

CHAPTER XXXV

A GAY SINGING HEART

WELL was it for Lisbeth that she heard the tale first from Orin Wisdom's lips. No idle words of scandal had ever preceded it to breed distrust or dislike. And Orin Wisdom, dwelling upon hill tops all her life through, led the girl up also to them, out of the darker vales of the happenings between; linking her lightly, though not the less loyally to the gipsy race whose blood coursed her veins, leaving her at the story's close neither scornful nor ashamed of the wild strain, but thinking of it as past, and long past, while in this new pulsing wonderful present she was bound now by kindred ties with her who spoke; with beautiful Joan; with Halfway whose big old rooms had echoed once to the sound of her mother's childish feet, and drawn with luring love her own; best of all, and most wonderful, with its stern faced handsome Master, who even in that one interview where he had scorned her very presence, had by some strange reversal of retribution drawn her to him with admiration yearning and unafraid.

In this spirit she met him, she and Joan sitting side by side upon the old settle within the wing room, hands clasped, hearts warm, faces upturned with love toward him who spoke.

He spared not himself in the telling, baring before them the events that had been chief factors in setting his feet in solitary places; making no excuses for the unyielding indomitable will that had mastered all his actions.

When he told of his sister Joan, her beauty and radiant girlhood, Lisbeth turned to Joan with admiring glance, for she had already been shown the old painting in the loom-room,

and had seen the resemblance. And when he spoke of the little brown-faced sister whom, when no woman of his family was left at Halfway to care for her, he had turned back among her people in the forest ways, enduring remorse for the deed all the years of his life since, and believing that for judgment of it no children of his own had blessed his fireside, hot tear-drops plashed from their young eyes upon their soft cheeks, and they started with common impulse toward him, but he stayed them with restraining hand till his story should be through.

"And now Halfway is mine no longer," said he, his voice firm and steady, but the hands upon his chair arms tight clenched and chill. "By the will we have found, it and all that is contained therein, passes to you two. I make no complaint. Under my father's other one I inherited at the cutting out of others. Now it is their turn.

"One thing only, will I speak of, on my own behalf. The portion that by common law would have been my sister Joan's I long ago set aside in her name, in money value; it is still intact; and much did I spend beside in these later years seeking to locate her, but she seemed to have sought to cover up all trace of her whereabouts until through a mere happening I heard of her grandchild and following up the trail got Jo-ann back to Halfway. The portion my little step-sister and her mother would have had, has been paid over and over through the long years, to those of her people who cared for her, and to many another wayfarer since, in her memory.

"But that is all done with, now; we have a new life stretching ahead, and what I want to have you know is that unreservedly and without any murmur I relinquish to you my claim on Halfway. I have plenty besides to keep me, and we can later discuss the best plans and disposition of your affairs, but from this hour on, the house of my father's and yours, belongs lawfully to you two alone."

Joan, who knew somewhat of his inordinate pride in the great house, who understood by her own upgrowing love for it

how he joyed in the ownership and to dwell therein, was swept off her feet with the fulness of his renunciation, and giving Lisbeth a nod as if a signal between them, the two sprang forward to his chair.

"O, you blessed Uncle Garret," she cried. "You don't have to give up Halfway, for there isn't any will, now."

"I do not understand you, Jo-ann—We will not trifle over so serious a thing," said he, the masterful ring coming quick again to the old voice that had been sounding only sad or tender notes during his recital.

"Uncle Garret," said Lisbeth, her dark eyes with their soft sunshine meeting his own as she spoke the unusual word, spoke it so longingly and fondly that his own heart warmed with love at her surrender. "Uncle Garret, Joan is right about there not being any will. We burned it up."

"Burned it up! What do you mean?"

"All to ashes," said Joan, "up in the loom-room, the very place where I found the bad old thing. And now it's all done with, forever!"

"I assume that Jo-ann did the burning, it sounds like one of her ways of settling things. But the mere destruction of the will does not do away with its provisions, since we are all well acquainted with them."

"Joan did think of it first," said Lisbeth, "for she always knows such lovely things to do, but I was just as glad to have it done as she was, and we each put a match to it together. We don't want Halfway, and we won't take it, for our own. We couldn't, Uncle Garret."

"You see if we were what Uncle Amsey called the only claimants," urged Joan, "then we had a right to do what we pleased with the will; and that did please us, so, Uncle Garret. It's just another of the old spooks gone; the cloth was one, and the water-pipes two"; checking them off upon her small fingers, "the 'thirst' is going to be three, for we can all knock it off now because not one of us has got left a *'carking care or a dark deed to brood over'* like old Jem said

were the kind who had it worst; and the will is four. So now we're clear of them all and can go on and be happy. Uncle Amsey said you ought to know yourself that it couldn't be what he called 'proved,' because you had been in possession so long, and he said you wouldn't be blamed a bit either for holding on to it. But you didn't, and O, it was splendid to give it all up like you did!"

"I did only what was required of me by right and justice, and do not choose now to stay my hand," said he. "The text of the will shall be my law, even if unbound by the instrument itself. I abide by it still. Halfway is yours."

"O, but you can't, you can't!" cried Joan, with a flash of her defiance, yet tender and sweet withal, sitting upon his chair arm and leaning her warm young cheek for a moment against his own. "It's on account of our name, too, that we did it, the dear lovely name that Lisbeth and I are so proud to have. For all the people around to know you didn't own Halfway any more, would make such a story for them to tell! And we wouldn't want to live here without you; it's because you are the head of it, you know, that makes it seem so grand and lovely to us both," and Joan smiled the flower smile upon him from her place of vantage.

But it brought her no reward, and he made her no response.

"It's almost time for supper," said she, "and I ought to go see what Amanda is getting ready, for Pelig is coming and he'll just only have time to eat and that's all, before he has to get away again. But I'm not going to stir a step, to do anything, until you tell us you'll let things go on just the same way. You can take care of us both, and give us lots of dollars to spend, and each of us a horse to ride, and lots of other things we've always wanted—but we want *you* to *give* them to us, don't you see, Uncle Garret, because neither of us has ever had a mother or father to do it for us. We're never going to tell a single soul about the will, or what we did with it, except of course, Aunt Orin and Uncle Amsey.

And Halfway is all yours again and you shall love us just as hard as ever you can to make up to us for it."

The old Uncle looked half sadly, half proudly into the deep blue eyes that lent so lovely a light to her small face, and reached out a hand for Lisbeth. "So many of those I loved and lost, and the ways that I love, are bound up in you both," said he, "that I find it hard to deny you in this thing you ask. It shall be as you wish, about the inheritance, but is all the same in the end, for to-morrow I will draw up a will that shall leave all I am possessed of, equally, to you both, and should I die meantime, the law will give it. Does this satisfy you?"

"O, thank you, thank you! And I'm going to give you a big hug now to make up for all the times I believe I really wanted to but didn't dare!" answered Joan. "Lisbeth can have her turn after I'm gone. Isn't it beautiful that she is a real cousin to me! And see I told you her cheeks had the loveliest roses in them and that she was dear as could be, and they really and truly are Wisdom roses now, aren't they, Uncle Garret?"

"Yes, Wisdom roses in very truth, Jo-ann, and Wisdom graces in all you both do, to shame an old man of the race who was forgetting them. Send Pelig to me when he comes in. And while you are out Lisbeth and I will get acquainted."

That night, when Pelig had returned upon his way, and all things were settled in order in the Halfway household, while Lisbeth made ready for sleep upon the big four poster, Joan stole softly down the long stair and tapped gently at the wing-room door.

"Enter, Jo-ann," said the Master of Halfway. He had risen from the chair on which they had left him but a few minutes before, and was standing before the hearth, his gaze upon the old portrait above it. "Supposed it would be you," said he as she crossed the room and stood beside him.

"I thought I would come and say good-night to you

again, all myself, this first night, Uncle Garret. And I wanted to ask you just three or four things, so we could start out all fresh and straight in the morning, you know."

"My sins remembered no more against me—is that what you mean, Jo-ann? It surely will be a new day. And I expect those three or four things are duly catalogued and listed, as usual; so what is the very first?"

Joan gave him her look of perfect understanding. "It was about Phoebe. She comes back so unexpectedly always, and might get here before I'm up, even. Will we tell her everything about what has happened, except the will, of course."

"Phoebe will find out everything even if we do not tell her ourselves; and so except about the will, which you two have decreed shall be null and void in effect as well as in existence, we may as well let Phoebe have the story straight through!"

"O, I'm so glad, because she is good as good can be to me, now-a-days. And I thought, Uncle Garret, that we might—all of us be getting on better with her, after this."

"Meaning myself, I assume! Well, Jo-ann, I'll not exactly subscribe to that. Phoebe and I shall have our daily bout, as usual; it has become a habit of our life these late years, neither of us suffering thereby. I've no wings growing yet, Jo-ann, and I rather fancy that the rest of you will fare better if she and I vent our strong wills upon each other. Do you understand? But the old grievance removed, and communication opened up between the two houses, will not leave as much time as formerly, nor so much ground, for disputings and broodings, so you may ease your mind somewhat, along those lines. What was the second on the list?"

Joan uttered a sigh of foreboding in spite of herself, for that way lay danger. "Aunt Orin wants us to go down there, for supper to-morrow, instead of their coming up here, as you planned. She thinks, Uncle Garret, that it's your place to go there, first, since they never really shut you out, she says. And you won't mind, will you? I thought I would

ask you about it alone, instead of before Lisbeth, so if you didn't like the idea, you could say it just to me."

The Master of Halfway meditated a moment or two upon it. "I see," said he. "Orin is on her dignity. I can't say that I actually like the idea, Jo-ann, but I admit her claim. So we will go down to the Island to-morrow; does my answer suit you? And what would you have done had I refused?"

"I guess I would have had to think up some other way to get us together, for I wouldn't want to hurt Aunt Orin's feelings. She is so grand and lovely. But I'm so glad you'll really go. It's a beautiful place, the Island house, and I love it a lot—but not as well as I love Halfway, because this is my really first home."

"Aunt Orin is going to ask Cousin Louisa and Alexander, and of course Phoebe and Captain Nat if Phoebe gets back in time."

"Which will be quite proper, and much to my liking. Both Alec and Nat aided greatly in the search for Lisbeth's parentage, Amsey tells me, and they will naturally want to be first to see her established in the family. No others I hope, Jo-ann?"

"Aunt Orin did want the minister, but Uncle Amsey wouldn't hear to it—said there would be trouble brewing straight off," replied Joan, "so Aunt Orin said that perhaps he was right."

"As undoubtedly he was. I note that Amsey has not failed in his memory. In his day and generation, Jo-ann, he knew me fairly well. I would not be in a mood for anyone beside the family tomorrow. As time goes on we will enlarge the circle, and then the minister shall be the first one bidden."

"We are to have tea up in the beautiful round room, Uncle Garret, early, you know, and a fine supper downstairs, afterward, on the queer chair-table. Martha is going down all day, to cook and bake for it. It will be splendid. I love a party so."

"You shall have some fine ones here at Halfway—later on —Jo-ann."

She understood what he meant, and did not answer for a bit.

"That was a beautiful one we did have, wasn't it?" said she after the pause when each of them was thinking of the little quiet and clever hostess of it. "That was the very first time I thought I'd like to love you, Uncle Garret. You looked so splendid, and you were so fine to Pelig," and then fearful lest she might overstep, was silent again.

"The third—was there a third on your list?" he asked, with the scales fallen from off his eyes seeing already what a comrade she was going to be to him. "Or are you quite all settled now about the worries, Jo-ann?"

The dimples that hadn't deepened in her cheeks for many a day, showed themselves for his undoing, and evidently this third was the greatest of them all.

"It's my name, that way you say it. I do wish you would say it like everybody else does, and the way I like myself. Do you suppose you possibly could, Uncle Garret, now while we're starting out kind of new?"

"But I like my own pronouncing of it best," said the great-uncle, not undone by the dimples. And then, as they withdrew from sight and a shadow fell over the cheeks as when the sun shines not, "Suppose you think of it as my own special love-name for you—all the others to call you Joan, but only your old Uncle who is beholden to you for a new grace of heart, to call you Jo-ann."

"O, what a dear nice Uncle Garret," she said, smiles chasing away the shadow. "To think of that lovely way out of it! I wouldn't ever, ever want you to say it like other people now. And hasn't it been the loveliest day? There'll be an awful lot to pray about to-night, I guess."

"You pray, do you?" asked he quietly.

"Of course. Sometimes it's to ask, and sometimes to thank, but often it's just to talk it over, and I like those times best,

for you get more out of it; it smooths things as you go along, instead of waiting for a great big snarl to be got out of the way all at once, you see."

"I see, but I do not know, Jo-ann."

"I wish you would, Uncle Garret."

"I wish I might."

"Well, if you want to, and do, why, that's all there is to it," said she who had "sought" out of loneliness and for direction, and had always "found."

"Well up in theology, too, I perceive," said he, with the new friendly smile. "You have a solid little head. I wonder where you would have got all those ordered workings of it, so young."

"Must be because it's a Wisdom one," said Joan, dropping it down an instant, dark braids, blue ribbons and all, upon the old arm that had not known such a treasure these many a year. "For I haven't ever had any chances much. I'm just a 'waif'—Lisbeth and I, you know," with the crooked smile that had the daring quirk to it.

He noted the allusion. "Wisdom waifs," corrected he.

"That makes all the difference, doesn't it? And Pelig is another, three of us there are now, for you to be helping on in the world. How will Lisbeth and I learn things? We won't want to leave you to go away to school."

"I have been thinking about that. I'll ask my friend the Schoolmaster to come stay with us this winter. He can run at large in the third story, and not be in our way, nor we in his. He will teach you the solids, and you can go to Orin for the graces and heroics. He'll keep me company too, and let you be free to ride your horses and spend your silver dollars and be gay and happy here in the few years left you before some man will carry you off."

"On a 'black horse,' Uncle Garret! I'll not stir a step with any man unless he lets me run away with him on a black horse, like that first grandmother Joan came here. O dear, I hope we'll all live a thousand years! For one bit of a

shorter time would not give me a chance to love you and Halfway and Lisbeth and the Island and all the rest of the beautiful things that have come to me for my very own!"

And Joan said her good-night, and was gone from out the wing rooms, whence she had fled so many a time with sore and troubled thoughts, in and out which she would pass for many a year yet in grey old Halfway, but always carrying about with her, then as now, her happy singing heart, and the touchstone that could turn the drear and barren things to green and gold.

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